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Ace-High WESTERN STORIES

PRAIRIE PIRATES OF THE BIG MUDDY

SMASHING RIVER-TOWN NOVEL

by NORMAN A. FOX

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Ace-High Western Stories

Vol. XIV, No. 1 CONTENTS February, 1947

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North or south, old or new, there's always a frontier to challenge red-blooded men!

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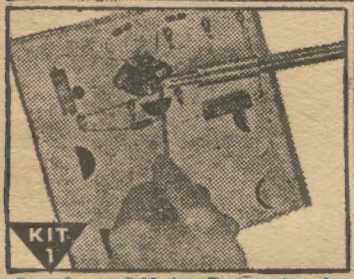

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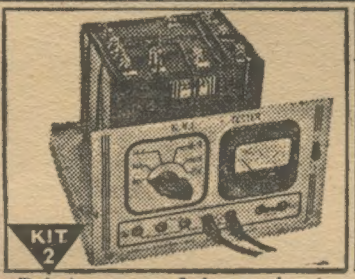

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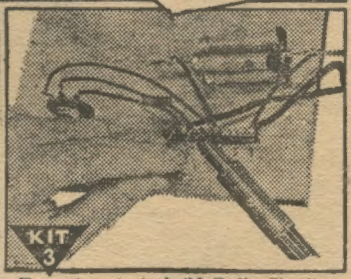

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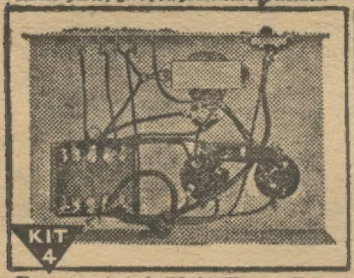

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★ Out-Trail Caravan ★

THIS month, if everything goes according to plan, the way will be cleared to add a new star to the United States flag. The Alaskan Statehood Bill is scheduled to come before Congress in the next few weeks, and, according to most Congressmen, it will be passed without much opposition. That means, before the year is out, there'll very likely be a Forty Ninth State.

We hope this comes to pass, mostly because the people of Alaska want it (The Territory's 85,000 citizens voted by more than two to one for admission to the Union last fall). Then, too, we've always had a certain fondness and admiration for the big, friendly Territory to the north. Its story is strikingly like the story of the Old West; the men who settled there were mainly Westerners, and they brought their own vigorous, robust way of life with them.

When Secretary of State Seward bought Alaska from the Czar of Russia a few years after the Civil War, for $7,200,000, he was severely criticized. The acquisition of "Seward's Icebox" was condemned as the number one sucker deal of the time. But a few years later, the icebox began to turn out golden ice-cubes, and the United States had a bonanza on its hands.

The Alaskan Gold Rush brought thousands of adventurers, pioneers, fortune-seekers, into the Klondyke and the nearby Yukon Territory. And the usual rabble of tinhorns, dancehall girls, speculators, and gunmen followed.

It was a page out of the Old West. False-fronted towns where haircuts sold for $100, a shot of rotgut cost $50, and human life was the cheapest of commodities, sprang up, flourished during the life of the strike, and then sank down into the muck and mire of the tundra, to be forgotten. Millions were made and lost with a flip of a card.

The boom-days of the Klondyke died out, although the gold fields were—and still are—scarcely tapped, but the stream of immigration continued northward. With the influx of farmers, fishermen, miners, trappers and tradesmen, Alaska took on a new respectability. Again, the similarity to the continental West was marked. Homesteaders penetrated the sheltered, rich valleys of the Alaskan Panhandle and the central mainland; fishing, mining and tanning villages along the coast and in the interior grew into the sizable towns of Fairbanks, Juneau, Sitka, Nome. Railroads were laid into the interior, and far to the north, up near the frozen Endicott Mountains, trappers and prospectors plumbed the frontier.

During the war, a new wave of migrations swept over the Territory. To Alaska came tens of thousands of soldiers and sailors. After VJ Day, many of them stayed behind, to settle in the Territory.

Today Alaska is big, virtually empty, bustling, modern. Airlines link the Territory to the Pacific Northwest with several flights daily. That engineering miracle, the Alcan Highway, is finished, and this summer thousands of Americans will drive their own automobiles north to have a look for themselves at this awesome chunk of the United States. Commerce moves in a steady flow from Alaska to the ports of Oregon and Washington. Much of the Territory is laced together with rails, and there are plans to connect the Panhandle with the Northwest by railroad.

The U. S. Department of the Interior is offering millions of acres of land to settlers, and this, plus the added benefits of Statehood, will undoubtedly bring Alaska the biggest and most prosperous era in her history. The future looks mighty good for the would-be Forty Ninth State.

We'll continue to keep an interested eye on Alaska. Some mighty thrilling frontier yarns should be reaching us from the Territory where men are, at this moment, pushing back one of the last frontiers in the world. And we'll continue to feature frequent stories of both the old and new Western frontiers, from the Arctic Circle down to the sandy reaches of the Rio Grande.

The next issue of *Ace-High Western Stories* will be out on January 24th!

THE EDITOR

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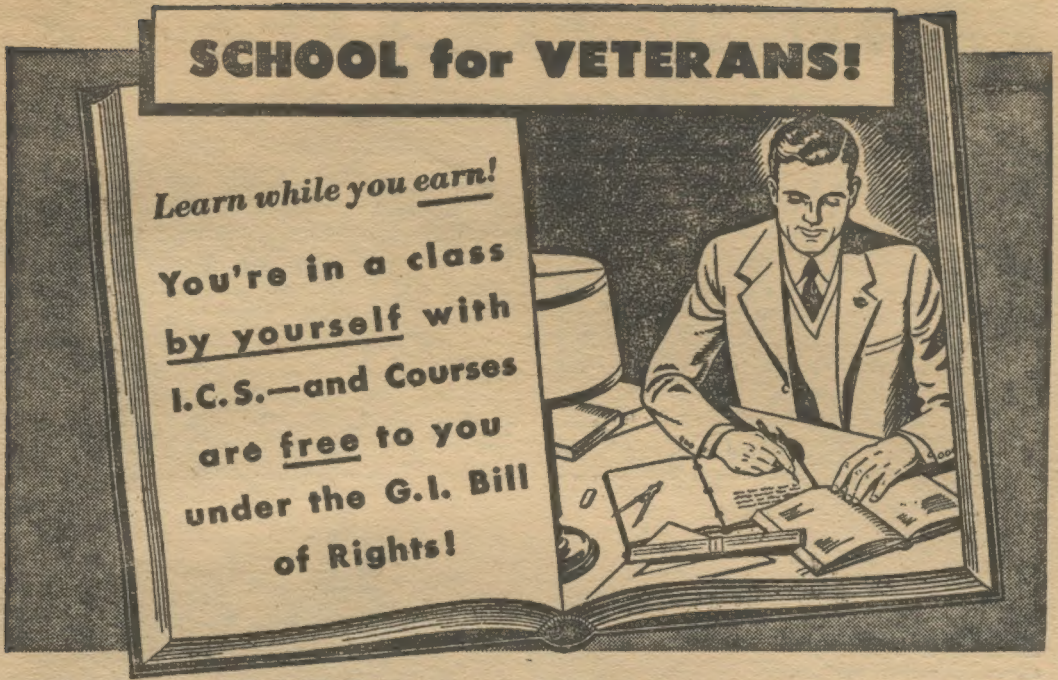

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PRAIRIE PIRATES OF

By NORMAN A. FOX

CHAPTER ONE

Trail's Beginning

CLEM STANDISH died with his boots off, passing on as peacefully as any man could with a fever that raged for three days and three nights. He died in a bedroom of Garth Kramer's Crazy-K ranch-house beyond Fort Benton, and, in the clearness of that frosty autumn morning, he might have heard the whistle of a steamboat on the Missouri if it hadn't been too late in the season for the packets to be threading that wilderness waterway. A sidewheeler's strident cry would have been a fitting requiem for Clem Standish; he'd given the better years of his life to the boats that plied the muddy passage between St. Louis and the Upper Missouri. But his ending came in the hush of a dawn when a bunkhouse was just beginning to stir and horses stomped restlessly in a corral. This was the finish, a period to

And now York brought his horse to a halt. Jeff advanced across the ice.

In the cabin, O'Mara saw Marshal Tolliver's rigid body, the knife buried deep in his chest. Standing over it, a dazed expression on his face, was Jeff Standish! That was when the burly riverboat captain's memory flashed back to a night twenty years before when Clem Standish, the cowhand's father, had stood in just the same position, over the body of another murdered man!

THE BIG MUDDY! •

Action-Packed Riverboat Drama

futility and flight, an end to being hunted and harassed—peace, after the years.

For Jeff Standish, though, it was a beginning. Jeff was twenty-four when his father died; and Jeff was big and rawboned and a man by cow-country standards. He looked it, too; a saddle had thinned him down to a wiry hardness; prairie suns had put a squint to his blue eyes and bleached out his heavy brown hair; prairie years had given him a savvy of horse and rope and gun. Yet there was a graver maturity to him when he pulled the blanket up over his father's sightless eyes and came quietly into the parlor where Garth Kramer sat waiting. The old rancher took a long and thoughtful look at Jeff and said, "He's gone, son?"

Jeff nodded numbly.

"I'm mighty sorry," Kramer said. "You should have let me fetch the doctor from Fort Benton again. But maybe that wouldn't have helped much. According to the sawbones, your paw was wore out."

The entire gang bristled with guns, but not a man made a move.

Jeff said, "The doc couldn't have helped him."

Kramer stirred in the rawhide-bottomed rocker where he'd kept his vigil. "Cawfee's on the stove, son. I shore wish you'd take a bite of food. You've been at that bedside for three days and nights without a single thing to eat."

He was big and gaunt, this Garth Kramer, and Jeff never looked at him without seeing Kramer as a symbol of the times, a personification of this era when lean longhorns were streaming up the trails from Texas to virgin Montana graze, an era when men rode free and equal, and a gun was the law of the land. Kramer was like that—a bit of Texas transplanted—and the bigness of Texas was in him. Jeff choked up now, but only for a moment, and when he spoke his voice was clear and firm.

"I'll take all the grub you can pile on a table," he said. "And I'll take it as fast as you can lay it out."

Kramer showed his surprise by a lift of shaggy eyebrows, but he said nothing until a king's breakfast was spread in the kitchen and he was watching Jeff put it away. There was something almost indecent in the way Jeff ate while his father lay dead a few doors away, yet the food was sand in Jeff's mouth, and it was only the strength he wanted. Perhaps Kramer guessed this, for the old rancher said, "What now, Jeff?"

Jeff had a coffee cup to his lips, and Kramer added, "I want you to know, son, that nothing's changed. Your riding job is still here for you. You were only a kid when your father went to work keeping my books, and I sort of took you along with him as part of the bargain. But you've made a hand since."

"That was eight years ago," Jeff mused. "I remember the night we rode in. Somebody down the trail told us that a gent named Garth Kramer had so many cows that his tally books had gotten into a tangle. Dad was always a hand with a quill and figures. You took him on. You never asked any questions, Garth, but they were in your eyes."

"I'm not asking any questions now, son," Kramer said softly.

Jeff began shaping up a cigarette, and he laughed while his fingers worked, and that was the only sign that tiredness and strain had brought him close to hysteria. "It's funny," he said. "We gave you our right names, Garth. We'd changed names a dozen times in a dozen years, but when you wanted Dad's name, you got it. I asked him about that once. He said he had to give an honest man an honest answer."

Kramer said, "We'll have the funeral this afternoon. Then you take a couple days off. Go riding into the hills and look for antelope sign. When you're rested, come back and go to work."

"I'm taking a trail," Jeff said. "This morning. That's why I put the grub into me. It'll be a long trail, likely. It will probably take me all the way to St. Louis. Maybe I'll be able to ride back here afterwards. Maybe not. There'll be a dead man on the trail when I've finished."

KRAMER drew in his breath. "More cawfee, son?"

Jeff shook his head. "Dad talked, Garth. He talked when the fever was in him, and that's another reason why I didn't want the doctor from Fort Benton again. Now I know why we spent all our years running. Now I know why we had a new name in every town we hit."

Kramer said, "I still ain't asking questions, son."

"You don't have to, Garth. You've got the truth coming to you, if any man has. You earned it when you took in me and Dad. Do you know the Malloy outfit, Garth? The Malloy Trading and Transportation Company?"

"I know their Fort Benton holdings—their store and the ticket office for their packet string. Headquarters for the outfit are in St. Louis, ain't they?"

Jeff nodded. "My dad worked for them over twenty years. Head bookkeeper, he was, and he went everywhere they had holdings. Mostly, though, in his last years with them, he was in the St. Louis office. I got that out of him in his fever. It was like asking questions of a man talking in his sleep. Sometimes he wandered off, but mostly he gave me the answers. Maybe, at the end, he *wanted* me to know."

"What drove him out of St. Louis, son?"

"A killing, Garth. The murder of Harlan Malloy, the head of the company. I

couldn't get all the detail on that—but I will. It seems that Harlan Malloy was killed and a sizable sum of money stolen from the office. And the job was pinned onto Dad. I'd guess that he saw the killing. Likely you heard him hollering these last few nights. That was him re-living that night in St. Louis. Tell me this, Garth: did you ever hear of a man called Bushway?"

"Bushway—?" Kramer shook his head.

"Bushway is the man who beefed Harlan Malloy. Dad kept saying that name over and over—Bushway. . . Bushway. . . Bushway. And he's the man I'm going after."

Kramer did some manipulations on his fingers and said, "Lemme see, you'd have been four years old then. Not a chance that you'd remember much about St. Louis."

Jeff shook his head. "My mother died when I was born. When Dad ran from St. Louis, he took me with him. Mostly I remember one frontier town and another, and always the two of us running. Now that's finished. Dad's running is over."

Kramer stood up and dropped his hand on Jeff's shoulder. "Finished, you said, son. Why not let it stay that way? Whatever claim the law had on Clem Standish, it has none on you."

Jeff rose, and he said, "My father didn't leave me much of anything but a name. Standish. I've got to pack it the rest of my days. I'd sort of like to wipe the stain off it. You can understand that, Garth."

Kramer sighed. "Was I in your boots, I'd be doing what you're going to do. But the odds are against you. You'll be staying for the funeral?"

"The trail's twenty years old," Jeff said. "I don't want it to get another day older. When I've gone, tell the boys whatever comes to your mind. Likely they'll understand."

Kramer gave him his hand. "Good luck, son," the old rancher said. "Good luck, and a swift gun at the end of the trail."

"Be seeing you," Jeff said and went out of the house.

At the corral he dropped a loop on his own saddler and got gear onto the mount, then packed his war-bag in the empty bunkhouse. Smoke was lifting from the cookshack; the crew was at breakfast, and Jeff looked longingly toward the shack as he headed back to the corral. But goodbyes would mean questions, and questions would call for answers. And in him was a restless urgency. Still, this was the only place he had ever called home, and an infinite sadness filled him as he led his horse through the ranch-yard gate. And here he paused, for, coming down the road that led from Fort Benton, was a light buggy, and its destination was obviously this ranch.

Jeff recognized the buggy. It belonged to a Benton livery stable and was rented out on occasion. As it drew nearer, he saw that it had two occupants, a man and a girl. The man had the reins, and even though he was hunched upon the seat, Jeff knew that he was tall and that all of him was steel. The fellow's age was indefinite; there was a trace of silver in his dark, shaggy brows, but his face was like wood covered with old parchment. He might have been forty; he might have been sixty.

"Howdy, cowboy," he said as the buggy was hauled to a stop. "This the Crazy-K?"

Jeff nodded, his eyes on the girl now. She was bundled up in a heavy coat, for there'd been frost the night before; but he could see that she was shapely, though it was her face that really interested him. She was pretty; big blue eyes and a perfection of features made her so. But she was more than pretty; there was a resoluteness to her that matched Jeff's own grimness this morning; and he wondered what had brought her here.

The man said, "Where will we find Clem Standish, cowboy?"

That stiffened Jeff; he asked harshly, "What do you want with Clem Standish?"

The tall man wrapped the reins around the whipstock, lowered the iron weight that was an anchor for the buggy, and came lightly to the ground. "I'll ask the questions, cowboy," he said. "I'm Boyce Tolliver, deputy United States marshal."

Jeff laughed then, laughed and said, "You come just about an hour too late, Marshal." His fist looped up, his knuckles smashing against Boyce Tolliver's craggy jaw, and the blow drove Tolliver back hard against the buggy, and the man went off balance and fell. Jeff was suddenly conscious that the livery stable team was rearing and that the girl had gotten her hands on the reins and was doing a mighty capable job of managing the horses. But Boyce

Tolliver was making no move. As he fell, his head had struck against the iron weight he'd lowered to the ground, and Tolliver was unconscious.

Jeff looked down upon his knuckles, and in that moment he could have told what blind urge had sent those knuckles smashing against Tolliver's jaw.

But Boyce Tolliver was already stirring to consciousness, and Jeff stepped up into his saddle, knowing that if he weren't on his way before Tolliver was able to act, there'd be at least a thirty-day delay while the law exacted its pound of flesh. He headed his mount toward Fort Benton at a high gallop; he was on the first lap of the long journey he might have to make. But the sting was still in his knuckles, and regret put a bitterness in him. Assaulting the law was a mighty poor way of starting to remove the stain from the Standish name.

* * *

FORT BENTON'S glory had waxed and waned and waxed again. A fur post, it had risen to prominence as head of navigation on the Upper Missouri, and now, with the fur trade past its zenith, the river port had become the staging area for the mining region to the west. Its streets teemed with French *voyageurs* and liquid-tongued Mexicans, whiskered mountain men and meticulously-dressed gamblers, rough-clad prospectors and eagle-eyed steamboat men. As high as forty steamboats were on the river between Fort Benton and the mouth of the Yellowstone in a single season. The closing of the Montana Road to emigration had made of the wilderness waterway the only avenue into the gold country, and this season there had been many arrivals at the wharfs. Fort Benton was arising Phoenix-like out of the ashes of its glorious, fur-trading yesterdays.

But here was a blessing that was mixed with menace. The closing of the Montana Road had focused Indian activity upon the river, and even though Red Cloud, chief of the Sioux, had made peace with the white man, there were those among his warriors who chose to carry on the endless war. On those occasions when Jeff Standish had come to Benton during the summer, he had noticed that the pilot houses of the packets were again sheathed with boiler iron, and he's seen small cannon frowning from the hurricane deck of more than one stern-wheeler. Danger rode the river these days.

None of this concerned Jeff on the afternoon he came riding into Fort Benton—the afternoon of the day of his father's death. He had come to this port only because his trail fetched him here; his journey, he presumed, would be overland, a race against winter, for it was far too late in the season to expect any packet to be on hand to provide the comparatively easy passage southward. Fort Benton lay over two thousand miles above the mouth of the Missouri, which meant that the riverboat season was limited; no captain dared tarry too long in the northland for fear of being frozen in for the winter. No, there was scant chance of finding river passage with autumn in the air and the geese honking southward across the frosty skies. And that was why Jeff's eyes widened with astonishment when he looked upon Benton from the surrounding bluffs.

There *was* a packet at the landing. No mistaking those trim lines, those decks rising to the cupola-like pilot-house perched atop the texas, those twin smokestacks with the ornamental work between them. But it was all of an hour before Jeff stood on the landing and read the name painted on the packet's wheel-housing, and he knew then that this was the *Memphis Belle*. The irony of it was that it belonged to the Malloy Trading & Transportation Company.

And the *Memphis Belle* was obviously being readied for the run southward in spite of the lateness of the season. It would be the last boat out of Benton, but it was going to risk the ice. Smoke lifted lazily from its stacks, and deck-hands and roustabouts were wheeling cargo up the gangplanks. Steam winches screamed as heavy mining equipment went aboard, probably to be sent to St. Louis for repairs.

Here, then, was a stroke of luck, and Jeff bent his footsteps toward the huge store the Malloy interests maintained in Benton, the store that was also the ticket office for their packet line. But first he stopped at a restaurant and had a meal. His life had a certain purpose now, and he had to keep the steel of him hardened.

Onto the street again, he walked warily,

for he was mindful that Deputy Marshal Boyce Tolliver might be back in Benton by now. There'd be no boarding the *Memphis Belle* if Boyce Tolliver hauled him off to the calaboose for thirty days of cooling, and there was no sense in letting good fortune be clabbered by carelessness. Accordingly, Jeff tramped along with his sombrero tugged low and his eyes alert for that tall, craggy figure he'd last seen inert beside the buggy. Dusk was beginning to gather, and when he reached the Malloy store, lamplight splashed from its windows.

The door of this huge, frame building led into the store proper, a place of lengthy counters and piled shelves and merchandise varied enough to meet all the needs of all the men of a far-flung frontier. Ordinarily there was a clerk on duty, even at this lax hour, and Jeff knew the fellow, a pale youngster who'd been sent from St. Louis a season before. But the clerk was apparently taking his supper, for no man greeted Jeff as he entered.

CHAPTER TWO

Ticket To Hell

HE CAME as silently as a shadow; the wariness that had marked his march from the restaurant was still strong in him. He closed the door soundlessly behind him, and instantly became aware that two people were talking excitedly in the next room. The door of that room was ajar, and Jeff knew it was the office of the concern here in Fort Benton.

The two people within that room were a man and a girl, or so Jeff judged by their voices, and they were arguing angrily. This embarrassed Jeff, and he wondered if he should cough loudly or stride across the room and bang upon the counter. And he might have done one or the other except that out of the babble of words he caught a name, and that name was Harlan Malloy's. He'd heard Malloy's name many times in these last few days and nights, from the delirious lips of his father, and thus it was with something of a shock that he heard it again, even though this was an establishment that had been founded by Malloy.

The man voiced the name. He said, "You certainly have Harlan Malloy's own brashness, my dear. But please bear in mind that you're only his daughter—and a minor at that. The day hasn't yet come when you can denounce Lewis York."

"But the day's coming soon, Lewis," the girl countered angrily. "I'll be of age in less than a month, and then there's going to be an accounting. My father's will may have put you in full charge, but you were to manage the company for the company's good, and not for your own. Do you think I've been blind? Very few Malloy profits have gone into the company's coffers!"

"My dear, who planted such poison in you?" Lew York asked, and his voice was that of a man who has been misjudged by a wilful child. "The company's in a bad way, I'll admit. We've had poor years as well as good ones. And competent employees are hard to find. Look at this young fool who's running the store here. When I came up from St. Louis to audit the books, I imagined it would be only a week's work. Instead it's taken three, and I'm far from finished. Captain O'Mara has ranted at me every night, claiming the *Memphis Belle* can't risk another day in the northland, and escape being frozen in. As it is, I'll have to let him steam out at dawn without me. I expect very little thanks from you, Rita, for the things I have to put up with as your general manager. But I do expect your understanding and cooperation."

The girl's voice grew angrier. "I can understand well enough," she declared. "It's obvious that you're trying to saddle your own misdeeds on poor underlings like the boy who's been running this store for half the pay he should be getting. I've looked into the books, too, Lewis."

Anger tinged Lewis York's voice, but he kept it in check. "I can only presume, my dear, that your long ride today wearied you, and that your disappointment at the end of the ride made you bitter. But why am I the recipient of all your nastiness?"

"Because I'm convinced that you've robbed me for years. And I'll know for sure as soon as I come of age and have the right to demand that the company's records be audited by a competent outsider. My father put his trust in you and arranged that you'd be paid well for a service you never rendered. I don't remember my father, of course, but if you've betrayed

him, Lewis, you'll go to prison for it. I promise you that!"

A slight scuffling sound. A sharp cry from the girl. "You little minx!" York hissed. "You haven't come of age, remember. Not yet!"

"Lewis! My arm! You're hurting me!"

There was the sound of struggling, and Jeff waited for no more than that. Rita Malloy was in the room beyond—Rita, the daughter of Harlan Malloy who some men said had died at the hand of Clem Standish, Jeff's father. The girl's frantic cry was tugging at him, bringing him over the counter in a bound. He kicked at the office door and lunged inward.

The fellow in whose grasp the girl writhed was as tall as Jeff, and even though his carefully-combed brown hair was shot with gray, he had a lean and wiry look to him. His long face was made longer by sideburns; his eyes were small and set too close together. All this Jeff saw in a single instant, and he saw the girl, too, and gasped, for she was the one who'd driven out to the Crazy-K with Marshal Boyce Tolliver. And then Jeff had his hand on Lewis York's shoulder and was spinning the man around. At the same time, Jeff smashed out with his fist, a wild blow that sent York careening against a desk.

There was fight in York, plenty of it. He came back with fists flailing, but he didn't know how to handle them. Jeff beat through the man's awkward guard, and sent York across the desk again, the barrage of blows ending when York lay crumpled in a corner, thin threads of blood winding from his lips to his chin. Only then did Jeff glance down at his knuckles and find time to reflect that this had been quite a day for throwing his fists around.

He looked at the girl; he wanted to ask her many things, but mostly he wanted to ask her why she'd been with Boyce Tolliver this morning. But he had no opportunity. Her eyes had widened, and she whispered, *"You—!"*

Jeff turned then, darting through the doorway and clearing the counter in another bound. He'd had no way of knowing that Rita Malloy was the girl who'd been with Tolliver. Not until too late. At the ranch he'd seen her without hearing her speak; tonight he'd heard her voice but hadn't glimpsed her until he'd dashed into the office. Yet he had no regret on that score. The memory of her writhing in York's grasp still filled him with anger. But if she was back in Benton, it followed that Boyce Tolliver was also back.

He was into the street before he recalled that he'd entered the Malloy Company to buy passage on the *Memphis Belle* southward. Truly, his luck had clabbered. There'd be no buying a ticket now—not when Rita Malloy had recognized him and was remembering him as the man who'd knocked out Boyce Tolliver.

FOR an aimless hour Jeff kept to the shadows of Fort Benton's quieter streets, his footsteps as indecisive as they were wary. Even though passage aboard the *Memphis Belle* now seemed impossible, he clung to the hope that there still might be a chance of riding the packet to St. Louis. And the mouth of the Missouri was still his goal.

There had been a man named Bushway in St. Louis twenty years ago. That man might still be there.

Such was the run of Jeff's thoughts when he found himself before a small, frame building in which a printing press clanked monotonously. Here was the home of Fort Benton's first newspaper, and Jeff, driven by a sudden urge, stepped into the place. A leather-aproned man poked his nose from the pressroom, and Jeff said, "Do you happen to have a file of back issues of any of the St. Louis papers? Say about twenty years ago?"

He was wordlessly supplied with the proper papers and he spread these out upon a counter beneath an overhanging coal-oil lamp, made sure that he was far enough away from any window so as not to be visible from the street, and began turning the faded, yellow sheets. The printer had gone back to his work, the press clanked in the room beyond, and Jeff scanned headlines until his eyes grew tired. He read of greed and guns and politics, of things trivial and things tremendous, and he had almost despaired of finding what he sought when his eyes lighted upon a series of flamboyant headlines:

HARLAN MALLOY FOULLY MURDERED
A Dastardly Crime!
LARGE SUM IS STOLEN
Our City Cries for Vengeance

There were more headlines, and a lengthy account followed them. The Malloy name had been big enough in St. Louis to make Harlan Malloy's murder an important piece of news, and Jeff read avidly through a maze of detail. And then, at last, he closed the file of aged newspapers and quietly left the building.

He wanted the darkness of the streets for thinking, for there was much to think about. Harlan Malloy had been murdered in his own St. Louis office late one night. Three men had carried keys to that office: Malloy, himself, Lewis York, his assistant general manager, and Clem Standish, chief accountant for the firm. Standish, who'd just returned from an auditing trip among the company's far-flung frontier outposts had come to the office that night to finish a report. York had dropped in, too, explaining to the authorities afterwards that he'd seen lights burning and had wondered who would be about at such a late hour in the company's office.

York had found Harlan Malloy dead upon the office floor, Standish hovering over him, a smoking gun in his hand. Nearby was a packed carpet-bag. Standish had snatched the carpet-bag and made his escape. Investigation had revealed that a large sum was missing from the office safe —currency that had been consigned by the government for distribution up-river. Boyce Tolliver, deputy marshal, had thus been brought into the case and had taken the trail of Clem Standish.

Boyce Tolliver, Jeff reflected, had been twenty years on that trail. But nowhere in the account had there been any reference to a man named Bushway. If he could put his finger on that elusive character—

And now Jeff knew that his luck had indeed clabbered tonight. Lewis York was a key man in this case; York had pointed the finger of accusation at Clem Standish, and York, therefore, might be able to tell a different story of that dark night in St. Louis than he'd told at the time of the killing. But Jeff had made an enemy of Lewis York tonight. No chance there of prying out information.

Thus Jeff found himself more obsessed than ever with a desire to go down-river on the *Memphis Belle*. At first the packet had merely meant passage to him. Now he saw new potentialities in being aboard. The *Belle* was a Malloy boat; many of its officers and crew had probably been with the company for years. Some might still vividly remember the night of Harlan Malloy's death, and, with long river days for yarning, a passenger might be able to draw out a bit of information here and there. Or so Jeff hoped.

The newspaper account of Malloy's death was the main clue, but there'd been a hint in Clem Standish's delirious reference to Bushway. Perhaps there'd been another hint or two in the talk Jeff had overheard between Lewis York and Rita Malloy. York, it seemed, had profited handsomely by Harlan Malloy's death. Had York been the killer, and had the man rigged the murder so that it fitted the shoulders of Clem Standish? But what of Bushway? There was the most elusive clue, and the sum of knowledge would not be complete until Bushway was hazed from hiding.

Jeff shrugged, then shook his head. The *Memphis Belle* was not for him—not now —and the only thing to do was to accept the circumstances as they were and head for St. Louis. He'd been overly long in Benton, and the town held a menace in the shape of Boyce Tolliver. Perhaps Tolliver had even discovered Jeff's horse at the livery stable and was waiting for Jeff's return. Tolliver had proved himself a patient man —aye, he had twenty years of proof behind him.

And that was why Jeff took to the alleys, his intent being to approach the livery stable from the rear and have a careful look before entering. Fort Benton had awakened to its roistering night life, a revelry so boisterous that for many years the standard injunction to visitors had been: "Walk in the middle of the street and mind your own business; this is a tough town!" The saloons were roaring, and Jeff, threading the alley behind one of them, almost tripped over a man who lay sprawled in the darkness.

JEFF'S first impulse was to hurry on, but some vague notion held him; and he scraped a match aglow and had a look at the man who lay stretched here. Liquor had tangled the legs of this one and put him to sleep, and, from the look of him, Jeff judged the fellow was going to be asleep for a long time. But, what was more impor-

tant, the man was of Jeff's own lanky build, and the fellow wore the garb of a steamboat roustabout. And here Jeff's vague notion blossomed into a plan.

He began stripping the drunk, at the same time keeping a wary eye on the back-door of the saloon, but no man made an appearance and soon Jeff had the roustabout's clothing in a pile and was divesting himself of his own outer garments. Climbing into the steamboater's garb, Jeff found that it fit well enough, though the cap was a little too large. Jeff lifed his gun from its holster and tucked the weapon inside his shirt front, grinned and said whisperingly, "Pard, I hope that load of popskull you're carrying keeps you warm till you're sober enough to pile into my duds. It's going to be mighty cold come morning."

Then he was easing out of the alleyway, and he headed directly to the landing wharf where the *Memphis Belle* was still loading cargo. Here was hustling activity; baled goods stood in bulky silhouette, lanterns bobbed everywhere, and men worked under the constant lash of a mate's strident cursing. The packet was aglow, lights rising, tier upon tier, from the main deck to the texas, far above, where the officers had their quarters; and steam was being gotten up for the early morning departure. The borrowed cap tugged low, Jeff approached the mate.

"Any chance of working my passage to St. Louis?" Jeff asked.

"We could use another hand," the mate admitted. "Go see Captain O'Mara. He's yonder."

O'Mara was swarthy with the blue-blackness of the black Irish, a squat, sturdy man with the look of a salt-water sailor about him. Yet his name was almost legend on the Missouri, and he'd never been more than a hoot and a holler away from the Big Muddy in a quarter of a century. He heard Jeff's appeal, shifted a vile-smelling pipe from one corner of his whiskery mouth to the other, and said, "A rum-head, eh? Your clothes are reeking right now. Lost your berth last summer by bending your elbow at a bar, I'll wager. And now you want to keep from being snowed in for a season."

"I'm a drinking man when I drink, and a working man when I work," Jeff said.

"Then get at it," O'Mara ordered. "I could use a dozen hands. Lew York seems to think that the smaller the crew, the greater the profit. But I'm clearing this port at dawn if it means leaving half the cargo on the dock. Can you smell the winter in the air, lad?"

But Jeff was already heading back to report to the mate, and soon he was trundling cargo aboard to be stowed in the shallow hold or piled upon the main deck. The work was simple enough, and he had only to watch the others to catch on to how it was done. It was a matter of load a dray, wheel it aboard and deposit the cargo wherever indicated. But this became a ceaseless routine, and it brought into play muscles that Jeff had seldom used, and before midnight was past his back and arms ached immeasurably. But his was the resiliency of youth and he continued to make a good showing, for here was his chance of being aboard when the packet steamed down-river. He wasn't going to tangle his twine by proving himself incompetent and being fired before the departure.

Yet there came a time when he was sure that one more load would be a load too many, and, his dray empty, he paused in the shadows of the main deck, near the boilers, his intent being to catch his breath and ease his back for a moment. He was flexing his arms and wondering why men made their living this way when they might just as well have a horse under them and cattle to herd and elbow room in which to operate, when a hand fell upon his shoulder. And he turned to find himself confronting a tall, craggy form that was all too familiar.

"Well," said Federal Marshal Boyce Tolliver, "looks like we've met up again."

Bitterness rose to choke Jeff, and he said, "A helluva steamboat man I made!"

'Your disguise was good enough," Tolliver said. "I've been watching you for nearly half an hour without being sure. In my business, though, you learn to look at a man's face, not at his garb. Come along, now."

Truly, Jeff reflected, his luck was on the sour side. Every move he'd made since leaving the Crazy-K had turned out wrong. And now he was in Boyce Tolliver's hands. There was a gun stuffed inside his shirt, Jeff remembered, but there was no chance of getting at it. Not with Tolliver's hand

upon him, and Tolliver's eagle eyes watching his every move.

CHAPTER THREE

Knife in the Night

TOLLIVER would be taking him off the packet, Jeff supposed. The next move would be a march to the Fort Benton calaboose, and it was therefore with acute surprise that Jeff found himself being propelled toward a companionway that led upward to the boiler deck. The two threaded this deck in silence; Tolliver paused before a door, opened it and forced Jeff into a cabin. There was an unguarded moment while the Marshal's hands were busy at lighting a lamp, and Jeff might have tried for his gun then. But Tolliver swung to face him and said, "Don't bother, Standish. I saw the bulge inside your shirt the moment I first spied you. I'd have taken your gun away if I'd been afraid of it."

Jeff said, "You seem to see everything and know everything. Including my name."

"I spent the best part of an hour out at the Crazy-K this morning," Tolliver said. "Had quite a long talk with Garth Kramer. He told me who you were. Likewise he showed me your father's body, Standish. You were right about my getting there an hour too late."

"And now you figure I'll be able to tell you the things my father couldn't," Jeff said. "You want to pick up the loose ends and write off the Malloy case as closed."

"Maybe," Tolliver admitted. "Take the chip off your shoulder, kid. I'm not holding it against you for hitting me at the ranch. But you jumped to conclusions just the same. You figured I'd come to arrest Clem Standish."

"You weren't there to pin a rose on him!"

Tolliver grinned bleakly. "The Malloy case has been closed for many years. Yes, the law was still looking for Clem Standish, but, officially, I'd been removed from the job. I was on my own when I drove out to the Crazy-K. I'd got wind that a man named Standish worked for the ranch, and it seemed that this fellow Standish made it a point never to show his face in Fort Benton. I wanted a look at him. By the way, didn't your dad have sense enough to keep on changing his name?"

"He got tired of that," Jeff said. "What fetched the Malloy girl along with you?"

"To be in on the finish," Tolliver said. "To hear Clem Standish's story of what happened to Harlan Malloy. Malloy was a close personal friend of mine, kid. His girl means a lot to me. She was sitting here in Fort Benton, waiting for this boat to carry her back to St. Louis, when I rode in. When I told her I thought I was nearly to the end of a mighty long trail, she begged to be fetched along."

"I've seen her since," Jeff admitted. "I had my fist cocked then, too."

"She told me about that, kid. Tonight. She's grateful to you for stepping in when York laid hands on her, and if you'd waited there in the store she'd have asked you to surrender yourself to me."

"So I could spend thirty days in the calaboose?"

"No, so we could put our knowledge together and see what we could make of it. I've never been convinced that Clem Standish killed Harlan Malloy, in spite of Lew York's testimony. But that's not the only reason I've wanted to talk to you. I need help."

"From *me?*"

"I told you I talked to Garth Kramer. He couldn't have spoken better of a son than he did of you, Standish. I need help to keep Rita Malloy alive. Would that interest you, kid?"

Jeff said, "Where's the danger? York?"

"You heard enough in the store, I take it," Tolliver said. "Yes, you've hit the nail on the head. I've kept my eyes on York for years—ever since the night Harlan Malloy died. Malloy trusted York, and Malloy's will made York the company's manager until Rita comes of age. Rita is sure that York is crooked, and she'll be able to go after evidence once she's twenty-one. York won't want that to happen."

"He had murder in him tonight," Jeff conceded. "I could see that. But what would killing her have gotten him except a hangrope? Fort Benton's a tough town, but it wouldn't stand for having a girl strangled."

"York overplayed his hand tonight," Tolliver judged. "He let anger run away with him. He won't make that mistake again.

When he strikes it will be in such a way that no finger can be pointed at him afterwards. That's why I'm afraid. Rita will be a cabin passenger aboard this packet. York isn't making the run; he claims he needs more time on the store's books. Yet York has delayed this run by every possible means. Why? He's too shrewd a manager to risk tying up a boat in the ice just to insure his own passage, especially now that there's Indian trouble. A packet frozen in between here and Fort Randall, say, would be like a sitting duck to the redskins. I'm afraid, kid, and I need help."

"Where do I fit in?"

"Rita will have a birthday before we reach St. Louis. If York is going to strike, he'll have to strike before this run is over. I can't keep my eyes open twenty-four hours of the day. And I can't trust any man aboard. Most of them are honest, likely, but all of them have looked to Lew York as their boss for many years. Take Captain O'Mara for instance. I'd stake my life that he's as square a Mick as ever climbed out of the steerage with the smell of peat smoke in his clothes. But I can't stake Rita's life on that. I can't trust anyone."

"But you're trusting me."

Tolliver gave him a long, grave look. "And the devil's laughing, eh? You're Clem Standish's son, and Clem Standish, according to the records, killed Harlan Malloy. And now I have to trust the son of Clem Standish to help protect the daughter of Harlan Malloy. But who else could I turn to? I'm banking on what Garth Kramer told me about you, kid. Do you want the job?"

"I'll be proud to help," Jeff said. "And now I think we'd better start talking about that night in St. Louis. My father raved a heap before he died, Tolliver. I want you to know what he had to say."

FROM somewhere on the deck below, the mate's voice rose stridently, and even above the hurly-burly of sound that attended the loading, some of his words penetrated to this cabin. The mate was demanding in the name of all that was foul and infamous to know the whereabouts of the new deck-hand, and Jeff grinned wryly and said, "That's me."

"Better get back below," Tolliver said. "I want you kept on as a deck-hand. York is no fool. I'm sure he knows that I'm suspicious of him, so likely he'll have me watched. It's best that you appear to be one of the crew and that there's no connection between us. When we've started moving and you're on your own time, come here, but make sure you're not seen. Tap three times, lightly, and I'll let you in. Hurry now. Tell the mate that one of the passengers asked you to help with his trunks. I'll back you up in that, if necessary."

Jeff extended his hand and Tolliver took it, and thus their pledge was sealed. Jeff grinned. "Mighty sorry about that belt on the jaw," he said. Then he was gone from the cabin and hurrying down the companionway.

He had his say to the mate, and that black-browed individual accepted the story in surly silence and ordered Jeff to his dray; and once again Jeff was going through the routine of hauling cargo aboard. His back still ached, and his arms, too, but he didn't mind this so much now, for, at last, it seemed that his luck had turned, and his spirits soared. He had walked in fear of Boyce Tolliver ever since coming to Benton, but now he and Tolliver were allies in a common cause. More than that, they would compare information.

And so the long night was spent; the hills were white with frost at dawn, and there was skim ice along the river's edge, but the great paddlewheels of the *Memphis Belle* were able to turn. Now there was confusion; the last of the cargo was being loaded, late passengers were hurrying aboard, late visitors were elbowing shoreward after bidding friends goodbye. Bells clanged and the whistle spoke stridently; and the crew was ordered to the main deck, the work done.

Jeff was among them as the boat backed into the stream, and he watched Fort Benton fall away and wondered when he would look upon this port again. A burly deckhand next to him said, "I'm going to find a blanket and sleep till we hit Dauphin's Rapids," and somebody else echoed this sentiment, and the crew began drifting apart.

This gave Jeff his chance, and he mounted the companionway warily and as warily came to Boyce Tolliver's cabin. The grayness of the early day was upon the

river; such lights as burned aboard the packet beat feebly against the murkiness. There was no one in sight on this stretch of deck as Jeff tapped furtively three times upon Tolliver's door. Nothing stirred, and Jeff tapped again, louder this time, and wondered if Tolliver, up most of the night, had gone to sleep.

Then a grim foreboding took hold of Jeff and turned him weak, and he put his hand to the door and let himself inside. The coal-oil lamp Tolliver had lighted still burned, and Tolliver was here, lying upon his bunk, his eyes wide open, but there was no sight in them, for he was dead. A knife-haft protruded from his chest. Tolliver had stretched himself out to sleep and an intruder had found him, and Tolliver had awakened for an instant, awakened to go to sleep again forever.

The door behind Jeff was still open, and now Jeff heard a gasp and turned to see a man staring in at him and at the body of Boyce Tolliver. This man, a purser apparently, stood transfixed for a moment and then vanished from Jeff's view, dashing along the deck, his voice raised in a wild outcry.

Jeffs impulse was to run, too. But where? How could a man effectively hide himself aboard a boat? A bound would have taken him to the railing, and he could have cleared it and swum for shore, yet something held him, and that something was the pledge he'd made to Boyce Tolliver. Tolliver had asked help in protecting Rita Malloy on this run, and Tolliver's death proved that the marshal's fears had not been unfounded. Deserting the packet would mean leaving the girl defenseless, yet staying would be sheer folly.

But now the choice was gone. The purser was back again, and with him was the mate and Captain O'Mara and a half-dozen cabin passengers, and one of these was Rita Malloy. She stared from the body of Boyce Tolliver to the face of Jeff Standish, and for a moment Jeff thought she was going to faint. O'Mara steadied her, and at the same time the captain said, "You know this man, Miss?"

"Yes," she said, her voice low. "I've seen him twice. Once at the Crazy-K ranch where he attacked Mr. Tolliver. Once in Benton. He's Jeff Standish, Captain."

"Jeff Standish!" O'Mara's whiskered jaw dropped. "You mean he's Clem Standish's boy? Grab him, Mate. 'Tis murder he's done aboard this packet this morning!"

THE cargo hold was the nether world of a Missouri River packet. The main deck, just above the water, housed the deck passengers, people who provided their own bedding and food; the boiler deck, second story of the boat, belonged to the cabin passengers, the aristocracy of river travelers, and these were also to be found on the third deck, the hurricane. Above this was the texas, and perched upon the texas was the pilot-house. Each deck had its color and its carousing, but far below was the cargo hold, shallow and dark and rancid with many odors. And there Jeff Standish was placed.

He wasn't shackled after the first day. But he was confined to a windowless room which always seemed to crowd his elbows, and the only furnishing was a tangle of blankets which served as his bed. Twice a day the door opened; a deck-hand, bearing a lantern, fetched him food, and then he was left to his own devices. And he raged in the darkness until he was spent with raging and realized the futility of his anger.

Everything had gone wrong. If Boyce Tolliver had lived and the two of them had pieced things together, they might have come close to the truth of what had happened the night Harlan Malloy had died. Yet Jeff had to face a greater fact, and that fact was that his real concern, grown from recent events, was Rita Malloy's danger. Boyce Tolliver had depended upon him, Jeff, to help protect Rita, and a fine chance he had of protecting her now! Jeff examined the door of his prison many times. It was barred from the outside and ponderous enough to withstand shoulders heavier than his. There seemed to be no possible escape.

Somewhere between Dauphin's Rapids and Cow Island, Captain O'Mara came to see him. Each time food had been brought in, Jeff had insisted on being given a chance to talk with the captain, and at last O'Mara put in an appearance. The squat man put his back to the wall just within the opened doorway, and he kept

his eyes on Jeff all the while. But he listened.

"You've got to let me out of here," Jeff argued. "When you come right down to it, where's your real proof that I killed Tolliver? He was aboard the night before you left Benton. A lot of people came aboard those last hours, and some left the boat afterwards, once they'd said good-bye to friends. Just about anybody in Benton could have put that knife into Tolliver."

O'Mara shrugged heavily. "I can't turn back to Benton and waste time on an investigation. 'Tis a race against winter I'm running. All I know is that we found you in Tolliver's cabin, and him not long dead."

"But what reason did I have for killing Tolliver?" Jeff demanded. "Sure, he chased my dad for twenty years, and I knocked him down when he come to the Crazy-K. Rita Malloy probably told you that. But I got all the poison out of me when I hit him. That was the beginning and the end of our ruckus."

O'Mara nodded. "Miss Malloy told me about that. Likewise she hinted that you'd done her a favor in Benton. She wasn't happy about having to tell me who you were. I knew your father, lad. I would have gambled that he was no killer, yet circumstances proved me wrong. That's why I can't be sure about you. And it's not for me to decide. I'll turn you over to the St. Louis authorities at the end of this run."

"Then you can't savvy that the only thing I'm guilty of was being in Tolliver's cabin at the wrong time?"

"And will you tell me why you was there?" O'Mara countered.

Jeff hesitated. Desperation had a strong grip on him; if he couldn't persuade O'Mara to free him, he could at least put the whole story into O'Mara's hands and beg the captain to keep a watchful eye on Rita. Yet there was Boyce Tolliver to remember—Tolliver who'd said, "Take Captain O'Mara for instance. I'd stake my life that he's as square a Mick as ever climbed out of the steerage with the smell of peat smoke in his clothes. But I can't stake Rita's life on that. I can't trust anyone."

"No," Jeff said. "I can't tell you why I was there."

O'Mara appraised him shrewdly. "I'll be getting back to my duties now," he said. "If you've more to say to me, lad, send for me again. But you'll need a stronger argument than you've given before I'll let you out of this hold."

After the man was gone, Jeff felt that all hope was gone. The hours blended into days and nights, but in this dark dungeon of a room there was no telling one from the other. The packet's engines throbbed steadily, and Jeff soon became aware that the boat was making night runs, something a Missouri River captain seldom ordered, except in cases of rarest emergency. O'Mara was desperately intent upon getting south as fast as possible, yet sometimes the engines were stilled, the great wheels ceased their sloshing, and Jeff sensed that they had hit stretches of river where night running was entirely too dangerous to risk.

Once when food was fetched to him Jeff ventured a question he hadn't dared put to O'Mara. As casually as he could, he asked, "Is Lewis York aboard this run?" The deck-hand said, "Nope. He's wintering in Benton, I guess." Then, the man added: "What's it to *you*?"

Jeff had no answer, and he wondered if the man would report the incident to O'Mara and if O'Mara would see any significance in the question. But nothing came of it; there were more hours of darkness, and in one of these Jeff awoke from fitful sleep to discover that the engines had gone silent. He had developed something approximating an instinct for telling night from day, and he was sure that it was morning and that the boat ought to be on its way. Yet it wasn't. And a coldness crept into Jeff that left him atingle with some dread anticipation.

He couldn't have named this feeling that possessed him. In a sense, it had been with him ever since Fort Benton had fallen behind, and especially since he'd been made a prisoner. It was as though he'd known, always, that doom hovered near, yet what shape or substance disaster was to have taken, he couldn't have told. Yet he sensed on this bitter morning that this was it, and he became conscious that the coldness was real, penetrating into the hold and making the blankets seem flimsy. And then, suddenly, the truth burst upon him. The tem-

perature had taken a drop during the night, and the thing O'Mara had feared had become reality. The *Memphis Belle* was frozen in.

That was Montana for you. The cold weather didn't usually come until after Christmas, but there was an old bullwhacker who'd once summed up the climate adequately. "Ye'll want a buffalo robe, a linen duster and a slicker with you all the time," this man of sad experience had said. But Jeff remembered that Lewis York had delayed this boat's departure from Benton, and he remembered, too, that Boyce Tolliver had seen something sinister in that move. The Malloy Company's manager shouldn't have wanted the boat frozen in, not when it was likely what marauding Indians might prey upon it, or that the ice, breaking up in the spring, might batter the packet to pieces. Yet York had deliberately run such a risk.

Feet were pounding on the deck above, and Jeff realized that excitement gripped the crew, but in due time his door was unbarred and a deck-hand was here with food for him. This was not the same one who'd answered so surlily when Jeff had asked about York, so Jeff ventured another question. "Boat frozen in?"

The deck-hand nodded. "When the temperature started dropping, it dropped fast. Here's hoping she climbs just as fast."

"What's O'Mara doing about it?"

The fellow shrugged. "He started chopping out the boat. The ice ain't too solid yet, and it looked like we might be able to cut our way through once we open a channel. O'Mara had the yawl out an hour ago to break passage, but it's freezing faster than the hands can cut. Probably smash the paddlewheels if we could get going."

"Then you mean he's just going to sit and wait for it to turn warmer? Sit here like—like a frozen duck?"

The deck-hand grinned. "For a man who's on his way to jail, you sure are in a tearing rush to get to St. Louis. Yep, we're going to sit for the time being. Until the big boss comes aboard."

"The big boss?"

"Lewis York. He's over on the far shore, him and a bunch of riders, and he's signaled us to stay where we are till the ice gets solid and he can cross it to the boat. He must have ridden overland from Benton with some new orders for O'Mara. Maybe York'll have all of us leave the packet and go back to Benton. Indians are on the prowl, likely, and I'd guess that that's why the boss fetched along a big escort. Redskins could cross the ice, too. But York's got plenty of horsemen with him, so we'll be safe enough. Me, I ain't hankering to winter in Benton, but I'd rather winter there than here."

The fellow suddenly swung the door shut, and Jeff flung himself against it and pounded frantically. "Captain O'Mara!" he called. "Tell O'Mara I've got to see him! Tell him I've got something mighty important to say!"

Suddenly Jeff had realized that he had to trust O'Mara. Shaping events had proved one thing clearly—O'Mara's concern over being frozen in had been genuine, and that proved that O'Mara wasn't playing hand-in-glove with York. York had wanted this to happen. York had delayed the boat in the hopes that it would happen, and York had tagged along the bank with his men, keeping under cover and waiting for a freeze. No, O'Mara had not seen York's intent or O'Mara would not have been making night runs, and O'Mara would not have tried forcing a channel for the packet this morning. O'Mara had run true to form—a river captain concerned only with the safety of his boat and his passengers. And O'Mara was now unsuspectingly playing into York's hands.

York's appearance on the far bank this morning, and York's signal that the boat was to make no effort to extricate itself but was to wait until he was able to come aboard showed York's intent with startling clarity. York had the packet at his mercy, far from any settlement, and York was coming aboard to destroy the boat and kill its crew and passengers, Rita Malloy among them. To eliminate the one person who menaced him, York had deliberately planned a massacre that would be blamed upon roving Indians, and, to York, the end would justify the means. The stakes were that high. What would it matter if the Malloy interests lost a packet and one more river disaster was added to the roster that gave the Missouri the name, "River of Graves"? When York's work was finished today, the Malloy Trading & Transportation Company would be in his hands.

Such was the scheme, and Jeff Standish saw it all now. And that was why he beat frantically against the door, calling O'Mara's name. But the deck-hand had left, and there was no response to Jeff's wild cries, no opening of the barred door.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Last Clue

AND then, suddenly, someone was fumbling at the bar that held the door, and the door swung inward.

The deck-hand? He'd heard and turned back? But, no, it was Rita Malloy who stood there, and at first Jeff could hardly credit his eyes. The girl had a shawl about her shoulders, and she had a gun in her hand, a heavy .45, but she was extending this gun toward Jeff, and he took it, gropingly, not knowing what to say. He had done this girl a favor once, but he had never supposed that that had made any real difference with her, in spite of O'Mara's remark that Rita hadn't been happy about identifying Jeff the morning Boyce Tolliver had been found dead. The Standish name must have been anathema to Rita Malloy all the days of her life. Yet now she was here, freeing him.

She said breathlessly, "Get out of here before someone discovers this door open. Go hide yourself somewhere."

She'd fetched a lantern and it burned smokily on a barrel just beyond the doorway. He snuffed out the lantern and took her by the hand and led her deep into the hold until they were screened by a pile of cargo. "Why?" he blurted then. "Why did you do this?"

"Lew York, the man you struck in Fort Benton, is on the far bank right now. He's going to burn this boat and kill everyone aboard. Oh, I know it sounds fantastic! I can't make Captain O'Mara believe it, either, but it's true!"

He got a grip on her elbows and found that she was trembling. He said, "I know a heap more about York than you think I do. I had a talk with Boyce Tolliver about him before Tolliver died. I was working with Tolliver, Miss. You've got to believe that. I didn't kill him."

"I know you didn't," she said. "That morning, when we found you in his cabin, I suppose I thought exactly what O'Mara thought. I had to remember that you'd struck Tolliver out at the Crazy-K and that you had reason to hate him, seeing as you were Clem Standish's son. Yet I'd heard what Garth Kramer had to say about you, and I'd seen you come to my defense in Benton. When I put all the pieces together, I knew you weren't the kind who'd knife a man in his bed. I've tried to tell O'Mara that, too."

"And that's why you came to turn me loose? Because you figure I'm innocent."

She nodded. "And because you made an enemy of Lew York on my account. He hates hard, York does. When he comes aboard, I don't want you penned down here to die like a trapped rat when he fires the boat. And I don't want you to fall into his hands without a fighting chance."

"These men with York? They'll back him to the finish? But I suppose he's paying them well."

"From the looks of that crew, as near as I could make out from the hurricane deck, they're renegade Indians and mixed bloods, men who probably worked for York in the old days when he was booshway for my father here on the upper river. Yes, they—"

But Jeff was gripping her arms so hard that she cried out in pain. "*Bushway!*" Jeff ejaculated. "You called him bushway! You mean he was once known by that name?"

"The word 'booshway' is a corruption of the French *bourgeois*, the title given to the head man of a fur post. My father maintained such a post years ago, until declining prices and the scarcity of the beaver took the profit out of the fur trade. After that he had York fetched downriver and promoted him to assistant manager of the company. Or so I've been told—all that happened about the time I was born. But I know that lots of old-timers with the company still call York Booshway. The name stuck."

Jeff's head was whirling. Bushway—*bourgeois*—York. If Jeff had ever heard that term, it hadn't stuck in his memory. The fur trade had petered out long ago. And the word booshway had had no meaning for Garth Kramer, either, for Kramer was a Texas cattleman who'd come north to Montana in recent years. Boyce Tol-

liver would have known, of course, but Tolliver had died before Jeff could tell him the word that Clem Standish had muttered over and over again in his delirium. To Clem Standish, Lew York had been Booshway York.

But York would shortly be closing in for the kill, and the knowledge was one thing and the use to which it might be put was quite another. Thrusting the .45 down inside his shirt, Jeff said, "Come!" Then he was hurrying the girl through the hold, threading the darkness, and together they came up a ramp to the main deck. Here passengers and crew crowded, their breath steaming this bitter morning, and here Jeff could see a wide stretch of ice-locked river and drab bluffs beyond. From the far shore horsemen were gingerly feeling their way across the ice, and in their lead was Lewis York.

CAPTAIN O'MARA was here on the main deck, and O'Mara spied Jeff and came elbowing toward the man and the girl, a high anger in his eyes. He said, "Miss, you tried to tell me how to run my boat, and it was a wild tale you gave me this morning. I put it down to a touch of the mountain fever and forgot it, but I can't overlook this. Ye may be Harlan Malloy's daughter, but by what right do you turn a killer loose?"

Jeff Standish's wrath matched the captain's. Jeff said, "You mule-stubborn Mick, that's your death coming across the ice! What the girl told you was true. Boyce Tolliver would be telling you the same thing if he was alive. But Tolliver couldn't trust anyone—not even you—for fear the man he trusted might be taking York's pay. Now put a rifle in every man's hand and station your crew where they can use those guns. Or stand here and watch them die on this deck!"

O'Mara shook his head dazedly. "For twenty years I've taken Lew York's orders," he said. "And now you want me to greet him with guns. It would cost me my job and my reputation."

"You think that York is coming to escort you safely back to Benton," Jeff said. "I'll show you different. I'll show you in the only way you'll understand. Watch me, O'Mara, and learn a little truth about Lew York!"

And then Jeff was forcing his way to the rail, and he clambered over it before any man could stop him, and lowered himself to the ice. It was slippery underfoot, and he had to edge forward cautiously, but he moved toward York and those horsemen who were coming. Behind him he heard his name called wildly, frantically, by Rita and he smiled grimly, knowing that she understood his intent. She'd make O'Mara understand it too. Lew York would show his hand when he saw the face of Jeff Standish, and when York showed his hand, Mike O'Mara would know then that York

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had come there on no peaceful mission.

And so Jeff moved away from the boat, closing the distance between himself and York. Soon he was near enough to see York's face and the savage faces of the men who followed their former *bourgeois,* but York hadn't recognized Jeff. Not yet. The steamboater's clothes Jeff had stolen behind a Fort Benton saloon made a difference. But in another minute recognition would come. And gunfire and death, likely, would follow.

Jeff was offering himself as a sacrifice so that a boatload of people might have a fighting chance. Yet he didn't think of it in that way; he would have scoffed at the notion that he was a martyr. He only knew that he was keeping his pledge to Boyce Tolliver. He was going forward to face the man whose trail he'd taken when he'd put his back to Kramer's Crazy-K. He was going to settle a score that was twenty years old.

And now York was bringing his horse to a halt, the first flicker of recognition in his eyes. Jeff glanced backward; the packet was a hundred yards behind him, looking like a stricken giant as it lay locked in the ice. Jeff grinned—a thinning of lips and a showing of teeth without any humor to it—and he said, "Yes, it's me, York. I didn't have time to introduce myself the last night I was in Fort Benton. I'm Jeff Standish, York. Clem's son."

York said, "Get out of my way. I've business aboard the boat."

"Killer's business, York? You used to be satisfied with one murder at a time. Like the killing of Harlan Malloy. How did that really happen? You killed Malloy and packed a carpetbag so it would look like money was the reason for the killing. But what you were after was something bigger—the managership of the Malloy interests. My father came to the office that night to complete a report and found you there. But you rigged the killing onto him, and he realized that it was his story against yours. You were a power along the river, and my father was afraid he wouldn't stand a chance. So he grew panicky and ran. That was his mistake. He ran that night, and he had to keep on running for twenty years."

York's smile was wolfish. "It doesn't matter what you know, you young fool, so you might as well know it all. Your father had a four year old boy at home. That night in Malloy's office I told him that if the truth got out I'd see to it that his son died—even if I was in jail. That's what stampeded Clem Standish. And when he ran, he branded himself guilty. No man would have listened to him after that."

"And you got the money my father was supposed to have stolen," Jeff said. "But you got more than that. You knew that Malloy had trusted you and that his will named you manager until Rita came of age. That's given you twenty years to plunder the company, but the reckoning day is mighty close. So Rita's got to die. And Boyce Tolliver had to die because you knew he was suspicious of you. The truth is sticking out of your eyes, York! You came aboard before the *Memphis Belle* left Benton—and put a knife into Tolliver. He made the mistake of leaving his cabin door unlocked because he knew I was coming to see him. That mistake cost him his life."

"The only man I've ever feared was Boyce Tolliver," York admitted. "So Tolliver had to die."

Behind York, his men sat in stoical silence. They had guns a-plenty; rifles poked from saddle scabbards and belts were bulging with pistols. But they were not reaching for those guns; the time was not yet ripe for that. So now Jeff said, "Yes, killing is your way, York—the way you've always worked to get what you want. But it's killing in the dark that you like. You wouldn't have the guts to stand up to a man, gun against gun. Even now you're hesitating, even though you know I've got to die because I've found out everything. *Why don't you go for your gun?*"

York's eyes flamed with hatred; his glance swept Jeff, and there was no gun showing on Jeff's person. "Damn you!" York cried, and his hand dropped to his belt; and Jeff knew then that he'd won—won and lost. York was going to show his true color, and O'Mara would see that spectacle and judge accordingly. But Jeff Standish was going to die.

JEFF was reaching for the gun Rita Malloy had given him, the gun he'd tucked inside his shirt. Lew York had to fire the first shot. That was mighty important. York had to try his hand at another killing

so that Captain O'Mara would sense what was in York's heart. But Jeff intended to go down fighting; he owed it to himself and to the memory of his father to have one try at York, and that was why he clawed for the gun. York had gotten a .45 into his hand; it spilled fire, and, at the same time, York roared: "Gun him down, men! Gun him down!"

It was York's shot that knocked the legs out from under Jeff, and that was Jeff's saving. He saw the gun blossom in York's fist; he felt fire sear along his thigh, and he went down onto the ice then, and, as he went down, a score of guns roared and lead pelted overhead. Jeff had his own gun into his hand now; he was trying hard to catch York in the sights, but York was firing again, and it seemed as though Jeff were being clubbed down. His head roared, but he was conscious of the banging of many rifles, the movement of many horses. He saw one slip on the ice and its breed rider went spilling. And then, suddenly, Jeff knew why the roar of guns was everywhere. Men on the packet were firing, too, and York's savage crew was returning that fire.

Jeff smiled then; smiled in the swirling darkness that was threatening to envelop him. O'Mara understood! York had indeed shown his hand and had overplayed it when he'd ordered his men to fire upon Jeff. Personal lead-swapping between Jeff and York still might not have convinced O'Mara; the die-hard captain could have construed that as some sort of man-to-man feud, born out of the long ago. But when York's crew had unleashed ready rifles, O'Mara had apparently come to his senses. The fight was on.

Horsemen swirled past Jeff where he lay sprawled upon the ice. They were leaving him behind as dead, and he might have died, too, for flailing hoofs struck dangerously close to him. Then York's men had swept onward, carrying the fight toward the packet, and Jeff could only hug close to the ice, clinging to the ragged edge of consciousness and trying to gather his strength. But he was no longer concerned. The packet's crew and passengers outnumbered these renegades; York's entire strategy had been dependent upon getting aboard the packet peacefully and taking over by surprise. There might be some blood spilled, but York had lost his chance the moment that O'Mara had ordered the packet's guns to blaze. York was only fighting now because he had to fight; it was that or flee, self-branded as a renegade, his dream of power ended.

Time became a blur of raucous sound and dim, distant movement. Painfully Jeff managed to get to his hands and knees, and he shook his head, trying to clear it. The gun had fallen from his fingers, and he groped around until he found it. Facing toward the packet, he tried to shape clarity out of confusion. Horses reared and guns flamed and there was a tumult of shouting, cursing men and screaming horses. Stray bullets chipped the ice around Jeff, some far too close for comfort, but he began crawling toward the packet. There was still York, himself, to be accounted for, and Jeff wanted to be in on the finish.

Again he was nearly run down; horses came swirling around him once more, and he realized dimly that these were the renegades in panicky retreat. There were fewer of them than before; dark, silent forms dotted the broad surface of the ice in a senseless pattern, but one of those forms was moving, a man erect who lurched toward Jeff. This man had been unhorsed, and he must have been wounded, for he seemed to favor one leg. It was Lewis York, deserted by his men when the fight had gotten too hot—York alone and desperate and determined to reach the far bank. Jeff forced himself to his feet and tottered toward the

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man, and in this manner they faced each other on the frozen river.

The guns that had been banging from the packet had gone silent, and at first that confused Jeff until he understood. York was the last enemy within rifle-shot of the packet, but York was so close to Jeff now that O'Mara's men didn't dare fire for fear of hitting Jeff. But there was a gun in York's hand, and there was murder in York's eyes. Jeff saw York's gun rising, and he tried to bring up his own, but his arm seemed reluctant to obey him, and the gun had gotten a ponderous weight to it. He remembered firing, and he remembered seeing York spin around. The man's boots failed to grip the ice, and York went down, the gun falling from his fingers to slide away. Jeff took a half-dozen tottering steps forward and fell across York, and that was the last that he knew.

He regained consciousness in unfamiliar surroundings, but because this cabin looked much as Boyce Tolliver's had looked, he soon sensed that he was back aboard the *Memphis Belle*. Captain O'Mara was here, and Rita Malloy, and a man with a black case and a gray, pointed beard and a smell of medicine about him. Jeff tried grinning, but that seemed to make his head hurt. The doctor frowned and said, "I've taken three pieces of lead out of you, sir. You'd better lie quiet for a while."

"York—?" Jeff managed to say.

"Alive," Captain O'Mara reported. "The doctor patched him up, too, after he'd taken care of you. We didn't lose a man, lad, and 'tis you who has the thanks coming for that. Can you forgive a man who couldn't recognize the devil until he smelled the sulphur on his breath? York's down in the hold in that very room where you were kept. There'll be a guard at his door from here to St. Louis."

Jeff said, "York admitted a few things out on the ice when he thought I was as good as dead. Things about the death of Harlan Malloy and Boyce Tolliver. Could you get him to repeat those things, Captain?"

O'Mara doubled a huge and hairy fist. "He'll talk," the captain promised grimly, "just as soon as he's whole enough to be able, he'll talk!"

Jeff smiled and closed his eyes, and it seemed only a moment until he opened them again, but it was much darker in the cabin and the doctor was gone and so was Captain O'Mara. But Rita was still here. She sat by his bunk, and she said, "You're perspiring. Have you too many blankets?"

"It's turned warm!" Jeff said in vast surprise.

"Yes, this afternoon the sun came out and the temperature started rising as fast as it had dropped. Captain O'Mara thinks we'll be able to move safely in another hour or so. That freeze was a freak of weather. We'll beat the winter south to St. Louis yet."

Jeff said, "Good . . . good. . ."

She took his hand and said, "I've much to thank you for. My life, first of all. And you've saved the Malloy Company, or what's left of it. O'Mara thinks he'll be able to make York tell where he's hidden much of the money he pirated from the company over the years. That money will be mine—and yours, too, Jeff, the way I see it. I'm hoping you'll help me decide what we'll do with it. Some say the day of the steam packet is dying. Once the railroad finishes building out from Bismarck, the river boat era will be ended. But there might be some other business where capital could be invested. I'd like to grow with this new country, Jeff."

His fingers tightened around hers. "What about cows?" Jeff asked. "Have you ever thought about them? Beef's the coming thing in Montana. There's acreage to be had next to Garth Kramer's Crazy-K, and Garth would make the kind of neighbor a fellow could count on when he needed a helping hand. We could start out with a small herd—not longhorns, but blooded stuff. You'd invest the capital, and I'd invest the sweat. We'd—"

"Shhhh," she said and laid a finger across his lips. "Doctor's orders are that you're to be kept quiet. We'll talk another day. There will be many days before we reach St. Louis, and many more before we get back to Montana again. We've got lots of time for planning, Jeff."

He was remembering that, and smiling, when sleep claimed him again, a deep and peaceful sleep, threaded with rosy dreams of the future.

THE END

SECOND-STRING HEROES

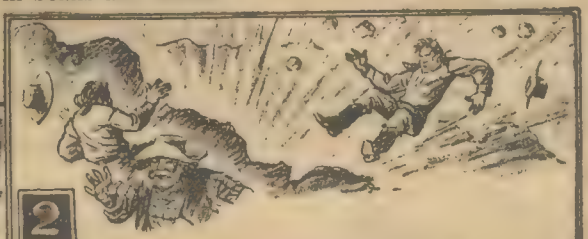
THEIR SADDLES EMPTY, THEIR GUNS AND LAUGHTER STILLED, BUT THE WEST THEY BUILT LIVES ON.

by ROBBINS AND WAGGENER

Hank Fletcher

1

Hank Fletcher, Virginia City prospector, was tubby, red-faced and good-humored to a fault. No one could figure out how he stayed at his customary 300 pounds, for the slender income he gained by panning the mounds of earth around the town's huge mines in the year of 1852 was hardly enough to keep him in beans and coffee.



2

Then, one day, after 55 years of sour luck, Hank hit a lode near Washoe that assayed higher than he could count. Showing a surprisingly canny business sense, he organized a mining company with himself as president and began to operate on a large scale. As the first blast was set, however, a dynamite cap blew one of Hank's miners to kingdom come. Hank, filled with remorse, nearly wasted way to a shadow.

3

Then he discovered that the dead miner had left a widow and five children. Promptly, Hank turned over to these penniless survivors every cent and share he held in his new mine. Only then did he begin to gain his weight back. "I'll hit it again," he said confidently, and a few months later, he did.

4

This time, however, two gunslickers surprised the patriarch at his diggings, beat him up badly, and jumped his claim. Undaunted, Hank started out again. Asked the reason for his unfailing courage, he said simply, "I need the money." Two years afterward, when he made his third great strike, everyone found out why—he built and operated a luxurious Home for Luckless and Indigent Prospectors and, in 1865, the so-called Saint of Virginia City retired to spend his closing days on its wide, comfortable front porch.

Lead Upon the Waters

By KENNETH L. SINCLAIR

THE big hombre stamped snow from his boots, crossed the porch and knocked on the door of the snug little log cabin. There was an abrupt, scraping sound inside; and then a small crash of a chair being kicked over.

"Who's that?" The challenge was sharp, edgy. "Speak up, damn you, before I put lead through that door!"

The big hombre was unhurried. He brushed some snow from the collar of his mackinaw. "Ben Elkin, Jed."

"Oh—well, shove open the door, then."

Rubbing his craggy, frost-numbed chin, Elkin stalked into the cabin. Young Jed Blue was half-crouched behind the table. On that table was a can of oil, a whittled wooden ramrod and some three-inch squares of cloth. Jed had been busy oiling up the gun which he now slowly holstered. Eyeing the sheriff, he fumbled behind him for the chair that he'd kicked over.

"Like I told you before," Elkin said. "You make a hell of a poor gent to go on the dodge. While you was sittin' here, trustin'-like, I could have snuck up to a window an' shot you easy as fallin' off a cayuse."

Jed Blue's young head reared. "Well, you come snoopin' in on the tail-end of a blizzard, so I can't hear you for the wind—"

"That'd be thin consolation, after you was dead," Elkin pointed out. "Trouble with

Ben Elkin was the kind of sheriff who believed that one embittered gent kept from committing a killing was worth a whole herd of soft-talk citizens. Trouble was, to prove that ticklish proposition — and keep on living!

"All right," Jed blazed, "I'll get my money's worth, anyhow!"

you is, you ain't got the cut to be an outlaw. You never did have, an' you never will have. So you better give me that gun you been oilin' so careful, Jed."

Blue's young face hardened. He jerked up, and back against the wall, awkwardly drawing his iron.

"No! Damn you, Ben, *no!* You've treated me mighty white, a heap better'n I deserve I reckon. But cut out for it or not, I got me a chore to do an' I'm doin' 'er! Ben, you keep away from me!"

Elkin looked at the big .45, wavering in Jed Blue's hand. And he felt sardonic humor tug at his own lean, rough-hewn face. He was reflecting upon the cussedness of human nature in general and himself in particular. This proddy young ranny who held a gun on him had cost Elkin his girl, already—and if he cut loose and killed Tate Lawcom, he might well cost Elkin his job.

Elkin's main trouble, he'd long since decided, was that his innards didn't match up with his exterior. He looked more like an outlaw than most outlaws did; but inside he had a mocking streak of sentimentality that kept him trying to help people like Jed Blue.

He settled down in a chair. "I hear you had a run-in with Tate Lawcom," he said.

"Damn right! An' I aim to have another—this time when I go over to that lyin' coyote's place I'm goin' a-shootin'! Last summer I loaned him nine hundred dollars, every cent I got from that bunch of broomtails I caught up in Horse Heaven an' gentled. I should have paid off my note at the bank—but Clane Wymer was crowdin' Tate hard, had him in a tight. Tate talked mighty persuadin', said he'd pay me off the minute he sold his hay. Well, he sold his hay, but he kept stallin' me. Now my note's comin' due at the bank, I got to buy a couple bulls, an' I'm needin' the rest of that nine hundred for some things for the house here. I got to have it—an' Tate laughs in my face an' tells me to try an' collect!"

Elkin knew about most of that. And a little more. June Cory was stepping into double harness with Jed, come spring. She'd been out here already, Elkin noticed, putting some frilly curtains on the windows, fixing up generally, probably baking him some of those huckleberry pies that melted in a man's mouth.

"Pretty hard to get nine hundred dollars out of a man," he said, "after you kill him. And you havin' to go on the dodge will make it pretty tough on June. I'd have to go after you, Jed. . . ."

"All right!" Jed blazed. "Tate's laughed at me—after all the talk he made about us little fellows standin' together against Wymer's Broken-Diamond! I'll get my money's worth in satisfaction, lettin' daylight into that unwashed son's gizzard. An' June—" The kid's young mouth twitched wryly. "You was sweet on her, before I ever hit Wildcat town. She'll forget about me—" He broke off, seeming sort of choked up.

Elkin was remembering the time Jed Blue hit Wildcat. A wide-eyed, eager kid, riding with Spade Ottell's bunch, he'd put his trust on the wrong hombres. They'd held up the Sun Mountain stage, which obliged Ben Elkin to throw them all in the calaboose.

But Elkin noticed the kid, talked to him some, then whispered into the judge's ear. After a while, he got the kid set up on a tiny spread up here on Cayuse Creek—a hardscrabble spread, with lots of work to bring out the man in him.

June Cory, daughter of another of the little ranchers who bucked the might of the Broken-Diamond, pitched in to help with Jed's reformation—and stayed around to fall in love with the cuss. She'd told Ben Elkin about that, one rainy night in Wildcat town. He still remembered the tears in her eyes as she tried to comfort him.

NOW young Jed Blue was on the prod, taut as a fiddlestring and in a state where a little shove, one way or the other, would either put him on the owlhoot trail for good and all, or settle him down to the life he was cut out for.

Elkin tried to figure a way to administer that shove.

"Tell you what, Jed. I'll have a little palaver with Tate. Meanwhile, fork over that cutter, just to play it safe."

"No! Damn it, Ben, I tell you I'll shoot! I been crossed an' laughed at, an' I'm losin' my ranch because of it. I aim to kill my own skunks—you been fine to me, an' kind, but this is one time I got to stand on my own hind legs. I'd hate to have to cripple you, Ben—"

Elkin reckoned that Jed Blue just might shoot, all right, in the wild-eyed fury that gripped him. So the gaunt sheriff shrugged,

rising and wheeling toward the doorway.

"Play it your way, then," he said. "Only give me time to have it out with Lawcom, will you?"

Then he stalked out into the snow, to his horse.

Tate Lawcom's spread occupied a choice bit of range, up in Bonnet Basin. Clane Wymer had always coveted the Basin for his big Broken-Diamond outfit, almost as much as he wanted Blue's Cayuse Creek range.

Lawcom never had built his spread up much. In five years he hadn't made as much headway as Jed Blue had in one. His cattle were piled up against a fence, now, tramping the snow and bellowing for water.

Tate wasn't giving them any. He was in his shack, tying his blankets into a tight roll. Big all around, puffy with fat, Lawcom had an unkempt beard and a belly that overhung his belt buckle. He greeted Elkin with a surly grunt.

"Prowlin' around in bad weather, sheriff. What's on your mind?"

"Like to come in a minute, Tate. When I get thawed some, I'll talk to you about Jed Blue."

Lawcom's eyelids seemed suddenly heavy, shielding something. "All right," he said, grudgingly.

Elkin stepped inside, the stale odors of the place assailing his nostrils. He glanced at the roll of blankets.

"Fixing to travel, Tate?"

"Reckon that'd be my business. But I'm just tidyin' up a little—no law against that, is there?"

Ben Elkin let it slide. Lawcom had let dirt accumulate so long that the only way to tidy this place right would be with a match.

"That money you owe Jed Blue," he said. "Too bad you can't pay up. Jed stands to lose his place, and all the headway he's made."

Lawcom's lower lip rolled out, and he spat into a corner.

"Still got that young hardcase under your wing, eh? Well, maybe I can pay him an' maybe I can't. You got anything that says I got to?"

"No. It would take a while for Jed to go to court over it. After the way he helped you out of a tight, the decent thing to do would be to pay up, even if you have to do it a little at a time." He spoke earnestly.

"I'll be the judge of that, sheriff! I've busted nary law, savvy? I'm just lookin' out for Tate Lawcom, is all." He had knelt, and was tying another cord around his blanket roll. The twine was long, trailing three or four feet of extra length when he finished the knot; and he dug into a bulging pocket for a knife.

He got the knife, all right. But with it came a big roll of bills, which fell to the floor.

Lawcom made a grab for it. But Ben Elkin got there first. With a long, fast, scooping move the sheriff gathered up the money.

Lawcom came to his feet, eyes glittering. "Hey—you give me that!" he grated.

Elkin grinned, counting the greenbacks. There was just over twenty-four hundred dollars in the roll. "Don't look like you're exactly hard up, Tate," he said. "Your little slip saves me the trouble of taking you down an' searchin' you."

Lawcom was breathing hard. "That's my money. I got it legal. You got no right to touch a dollar of it!"

Elkin sighed. The temptation was to peel off nine hundred dollars and take it straight to Jed Blue. But that would be an illegal action, and a bad example for that hot-headed kid. Besides that, Clane Wymer, fed up with Elkin's bucking the Broken-Diamond's range-grabbing tactics, was just waiting for a whisper of some action like that, to go after Elkin's scalp in the next election.

And Elkin liked his job. It gave him a chance to help people who needed it.

He handed back the money. But he said, "What I'm thinking, Tate, is that you've sold out to Wymer. Maybe with a little extra payment, to persuade you to keep Blue's nine hundred. So Wymer can buy up the kid's spread too, from the bank."

Lawcom's slitted eyes told him that he was right. Lawcom snarled, "You can't do a thing to me, lawman! Can't make me pay back a cent if I don't take the notion—"

"Was I you," Elkin interrupted, his voice flat with disdain, "I'd get out of here, pronto. Jed Blue will be coming over here after a while, and he'll shoot you like a coyote."

Elkin let it go at that. He went out, found an axe, chopped a hole in the ice on Lawcomb's water tank so that the stock

could drink. He was thinking that Lawcom needed shooting, right enough. But he was thinking of how that chore would back-fire on Jed Blue. And June Cory.

He mounted up, that sardonic, dark humor of his tugging once again at his mouth. Lawcom would have to ride through Wildcat town, in order to reach the pass on his trip out of this range. And Elkin reckoned that he could scare up one or two strictly legal ways of nailing Lawcom down a while, in town. . . .

HE RODE at a long, mile-eating lope. But he did not ride directly to town; instead he cut over to the south to Old Man Cory's ranch buildings.

He found June Cory chasing a stray yearling, watched her dab a smooth loop on the critter, take her dallies on the saddle-horn, and start him back to the corral.

She was wearing levis and a big, tattered sheepskin coat. But the icy wind brought color to her cheeks—and the loveliness of her made Ben Elkin's throat ache.

"You're right handy with that loop, Juney," he said. "Which reminds me—got a chore I'd like you to do. Right sudden like."

Her eyes sparkled as he told her about it. She agreed readily. "Just as soon as I get a hat, Ben," she said.

He rode on, then. Reaching Wildcat just at dusk, he put up his horse and stalked into the little office in the front half of the jail building.

His deputy, Bert Drumgold, took his boots from the desk. Drumgold was a spare little oldster with a drooping moustache and a peppery disposition. "How'd you make out with Blue?" he inquired.

"Got a gun stuck in my homely face! Bert, I'm going to sit me down here an' watch the street. But just in case I fall asleep, or something, I want you to keep watch too. When Tate Lawcom shows up, I want him throwed in jail. Charge him with any damn' thing you please—holdin' his eyebrows crooked, or havin' fleas in his beard—but don't let him get through town!"

Drumgold took a hitch at his belt. "Damn' right!" he agreed. "This here's one chore I'll plumb enjoy. You leave it to me, Ben—better go get yoreself a bait of grub."

Elkin hadn't realized that he was hungry. He nodded, and went down the street to the Chinaman's where he filled up on steak, huckleberry pie, and coffee. The pie was a long way from being the sort June Cory made.

On his way back to the office he saw Ab Jancil, Wymer's barrel-chested, bleak-faced foreman, come out of the saloon and climb onto the horse that he'd left to freeze at the hitchrack. Jancil's face was flushed, his gait unsteady. He gave Elkin a curt nod, rode out of town.

Elkin went into the office, held a hand against the window to thaw a hole in the frost that clung to the pane, built up a fire in the stove, and sat down to ply a toothpick. Drumgold had wandered out somewhere, probably to find a better vantage-point.

The sheriff yawned. He kept wondering why Lawcom didn't show up. The unwashed son had had plenty of time. One sure thing, he couldn't have finished his packing, caught up a horse, and gotten through town before Elkin's arrival. Drum-

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WILDROOT
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gold would have mentioned it, if he had. Not much escaped that old-timer.

Elkin's head teetered forward. A man sure got himself tuckered, riding hell-bent all over the country. And with a good warm meal inside him, he was primed for sleep. . . .

He awakened with a jerk. Drumgold was shaking him, talking excitedly. "Dammit, Ben, wake up! Pry yore eyes open, man—hell's bust loose!"

Elkin came to his feet. "Lawcom?" he demanded.

"Yeah—but not the way you figgered! Ab Jancil, ridin' home from town, found Tate lyin' in the snow. He's dead—shot in the back, robbed! Jancil sent a Broken-Diamond hand in with word. An' they're sayin' Jed Blue done it!"

Riding out of Wildcat town, under a thin, cold sliver of a moon, Ben Elkin cursed himself for not having taken Lawcom in right from his ranch. But he'd wanted to establish the fact that Lawcom was trying to make a getaway with his money, and without paying his debt to Jed Blue. That way, while Lawcom was held in jail on a pretext, Blue could slap charges on him, with Tate's attempted getaway to prod the court into pronto action.

Now Lawcom was dead, robbed.

He lay with his bearded face in the snow, in the center of a restless, grim-faced circle of mounted men. Broken-Diamond men, mostly—with a scattering of other ranchmen to whom the wind had carried the sound of the shooting.

Clane Wymer spurred his horse to confront Elkin. Wymer wasn't a big man, but he was solid, filled out and smoothed over by good living, with a steel-trap jaw and the clipped manner of speaking of a man accustomed to being obeyed.

"All right, Elkin!" he snapped. "You've babied young Blue along ever since he hit this country. Now he's shot a man in the back. What do you intend to do about it?"

"First, mister, I'll make sure Jed done it."

Wymer snorted. "He and Lawcom had a row over money. Blue's a damned young hothead. He came to Wildcat with an outlaw bunch, and but for you he'd have been sent to prison with the rest of them! What more do you want, Elkin? The boys, here, were all for riding to Blue's spread and stringing him to the peak-pole of his barn. I told them I'd have none of that. With things standing as they are on this range, people accusing me of crowding, I'm watching out for my reputation. I'm putting this in your hands—and demanding that you take action!"

Elkin said, "I aim to do just that. Jancil, you found him?"

Ab Jancil, cold sober now, nodded. "Just like he lays. I rode on to the ranch, roused out the boys. We all came back together. Mister Wymer sent a man into town with word—"

"Nice big bunch of riders," Elkin said. "Stomped out all signs that the killer might have left."

"What in hell are you getting at?" Wymer demanded.

Elkin glanced down at the crimson-streaked snow, at Tate Lawcom's body. "Shot twice, in the back," he said. "A killer's job. Jed Blue ain't a killer. He'd have ridden up an' cussed Lawcom out—any shootin' that was done, he'd have done face to face. He had a tall mad on, all right. But it takes a different brand of gent, a cold an' calculatin' kind, to pull a sneakin' kill like this one. Somebody who knew Lawcom was packin' money. Wymer, how many knew you'd bought Lawcom off, an' paid him in cash?"

The Broken-Diamond owner winced. Rage tightened his jaw.

"How in hell did *you* know that? Nobody but Lawcom, myself, and Jancil, here, knew that I'd bought that two-bit spread of—"

"Then," Ben Elkin drawled, "I reckon I'll have to search you, Jancil."

The barrel-chested foreman seemed to settle in his saddle, squirming a little to get a grip on the leather. "Keep away from me, Elkin!" he warned. "I've said my say—I found 'im, rode on to the ranch for help. We sent for you. Now if you're tryin' to hang somethin' on me, to save that young outlaw ranny you taken a shine to—"

"Not any," Elkin stated. Dark humor tugged at him. "Seems like every jigger on this range is gettin' all-fired wary of lettin' me get close to him, lately! Boys, take a look at Lawcom. Just one of his pockets turned inside out. The killer knew just where he carried it, an' how much to look for. When he got it he looked no

farther. Jancil, I'm comin' after you. I'm bettin' you've got twenty-four hundred and some dollars on you—you've had no chance to cache it yet, an' with Jed Blue practically nailed down for the kill, you figured there was no need to!"

Ab Jancil's palm slapped the butt of his gun, a small, deadly sound there in the sudden silence. But Elkin's .45 leaped clear of the leather, sent its quick thunder across the snow.

Jancil jerked to the impact of the lead, his gun spilling from his fingers. For an instant he swayed—then he pitched from the saddle as his terrified horse reared.

"Damn you, Elkin!" Wymer shouted. "Gunning a man of mine! I'll show you that you can't—"

"Take a look in his pockets, somebody," Elkin said dryly. "I reckon he seen a chance to get twenty-four hundred easy, with the noose tailored for another gent's neck."

A ranchman dismounted, knelt, came up with the roll of bills.

Clane Wymer opened and closed his mouth a couple times, then turned back to the gaunt-faced sheriff. "How in hell'd you figure it?" he demanded. "How come you were so certain Jed Blue didn't ride out here?"

Elkin said, "Well, it was either Jancil or you—and you sure didn't need the money that bad. Jed Blue wouldn't let me get close enough to pull his fangs, so I sent somebody out there that sure could. He'll get his note extended easy enough, now, until the court awards him nine hundred of that money. You wonderin' who I sent out to stop him? Why, June Cory—she's right handy with a rope. Prob'ly got him tied to a chair, right neat like. I reckon she's opened a jar of huckleberries, an' is feedin' him one of her mouth-waterin' pies just to calm him down, the lucky cuss!"

The Town That Drowned Itself

MOURNED by all lovers of the historic West are the numerous colorful ghost towns that have disappeared beneath the rising waters of mighty irrigation dams. It remained, however, for Roosevelt, Idaho, to drown itself without human assistance. Or at least, human intent.

When gold was discovered on Thunder Mountain, east of the town of McCall, a new camp mushroomed into being and almost overnight attracted a population of 5000. Teddy Roosevelt and his famous Rough Riders were making history at the time, and the new camp was named in his honor.

By 1907 the boom had subsided. Although the buildings of the town still stood, only a few hundred inhabitants lingered on. The following year, a group of placer miners, working on a mountain creek, inadverdently started a landslide, which moved slowly down the canyon side below Roosevelt.

The miners hurried to warn the townspeople, but they absolutely refused to become excited.

At last the onrushing slide had dammed Monumental Creek at the lower end of Main Street. Hastily moving up a few hundred pounds of dynamite—all there was in camp—the Rooseveltians attempted to blast the bottleneck in the stream bed open, but to no avail. Water impounded by the natural dam was soon spreading through the streets. Several crude boats and rafts were hastily improvised to save household goods and merchandise as the water slowly crept upward. Many of the heavier pieces of furniture and several pianos were necessarily left behind in the forced exodus. Finally the last family had abandoned its home to splash to safety, and Roosevelt was left to die.

THE town of Roosevelt is today hidden beneath a rippling lake which measures a hundred feet in depth from the surface to the principal corner of Main street. All that remains of the once-prosperous town of 5000 are several of the old dwellings which left their foundations to float downstream, where they lodged against the landslide dam. In the attic of one of them a colony of beavers has established headquarters.

—*Nell Murbarger*.

By BARRY CORD

Could this be Apache Wells, or was it all a bad dream: this moated town, backed up against the cliff like some medieval fortress, where dead men talked back, the undertaker replenished his stock of coffins every week, and a Bengal tiger ran loose in the streets?

A voice yelled, "There he goes!" and more shots slashed the still-

THE COFFIN-FILLER'S SYNDICATE

CHAPTER ONE

Ghosts in Apache Wells

THE JOLTING wagon slowed down at the fork in the rocky trail, and the driver turned to look suspiciously at the two wrangling pilgrims jogging slowly toward him along the other road. Behind them plodded a sad-faced burro, resigned to the load on its back and the endless arguments of its masters.

"Yuh ain't got the sense of direction of a blankety-blank sheepherder," the pint-sized one was telling his companion. "I tell yuh thet's Blind Corners we're haided fer!" He straightened in his stirrups to squint down into the long dry valley where a town sprawled at the foot of a sheer-walled mesa. "If I hadn't'a' let yuh talk me into takin'

Hard-Hitting Range Novel

this gol-darned trail at thet last fork—"

"We'd most likely still be wanderin' up there among those ridges," cut in Long Jim dryly.

Long Jim was six feet three, and, despite a voracious appetite, as thin as a rail. He had a long, horsey face wrinkled deeply around humorous brown eyes and weathered by the passing of more than two score years in the saddle.

He was a few years Windy's junior and that fact was injected into every argument by the belligerent man who rode at his side. There was no subject Windy Harris wouldn't take up, and he argued with equal conviction when he was on sure ground, such as placer mining, cows and rustling, as when the subject was totally over his head.

Windy was a small man, crowding sixty, with a small, leathery face dominated by snapping blue eyes and a pugnacious button of a nose. His shapeless coat was too big over his narrow shoulders, and the Colt .45, jutting from the thonged-down holster on his right hip, seemed too big for his hand. A white beard, speckled with brown, stubbled his cheeks and chin and an uncultivated mustache drooped around a tobacco-stained mouth.

He and Long Jim had trailed together so long they had forgotten their first meeting, and despite their constant wrangling, more humorous than bitter, would have been lost without each other.

They had drifted south from the Platte River trail, looking for the town of Apache Wells where they intended to drop in on an old Virginia City friend, Hardpan Jeffries. For the past ten miles the trail had led through increasingly rocky terrain, and with every mile Windy had grown more certain they had taken the wrong turn.

He settled back in saddle now, Long Jim's remark feeding his belligerency. "Why, yuh long-laiged, dim-witted infant, if it warn't fer me—"

"Wait a minnit!" Long Jim growled, waving a hand in the direction of the driver who was looking back at them. "Yonder's a gent who knows where he's headed. Let him settle the argymint. If it's 'Pache Wells we turn into the nearest chow shack 'fore askin' fer Hardpan. If it ain't we'll belly up to the nearest bar an' drown our sorrows."

Windy snorted at the proposition. "Chow shack! We jest et, yuh overgrown feedbag! You an' thet fuzzy-eared jackass, Blinky, cleaned out the last of the sowbelly an' beans less'n three hours ago!"

Long Jim ignored the observation. The wagon ahead of them was a long, boxlike vehicle with a light canvas top rolled up on three sides, revealing to his gaze a half-dozen long boxes that looked suspiciously like coffins.

"Howdy," Long Jim said, spurring up alongside the driver.

The man looked down, noting the thonged-down holster on Long Jim's thigh and the Sharp's buffalo gun that rubbed against his lean shank.

"Howdy yoreself," he nodded. He was a stringbean of a man, with sharp, stern features emphasized by bushy gray brows. A long black coat and a stovepipe hat gave him the look of a pious minister, but few ministers, thought Long Jim cynically, wore shoulder holsters.

"You a native of thet theah town?" asked Long Jim.

The driver nodded. "Yep. Ben livin' in Apache Wells nigh onto ten years. Name's Zachary Stack," he offered gravely.

Long Jim turned in saddle. "Yuh lose, Windy."

Windy bristled. "Yuh shore thet ain't Blind Corners, mistuh?"

The driver frowned. "Plumb shore, hombre. Blind Corners is west o' here, over yonder, behind them hills. I jest came from there." He turned and nodded to the boxes in the wagon. "Bought these coffins in Blind Corners yestidday."

Windy growled.

Long Jim's grin threatened his ears. "What's the best place in town fer grub?" he asked. "Place where a couple o' wanderin' pilgrims kin git a man-sized meal?"

"Cassidy's," Stack said. He glanced at the burro trailing them. Various kitchen utensils were suspended from the pack. "Salesmen?"

"Yep—salesmen." Windy looked innocently at his companion, but Long Jim had to suppress a grin.

Salesmen they were—on the surface. But in that conglomerate pack under which the burro plodded they carried straight irons. Cheerful old reprobates, they roamed the wide frontier, running off

a few cows here and there, and generally winding up in some sort of trouble. More than one locality had mistaken them for a pair of saddle bums, to their later surprise and regret.

Windy said: "You the undertaker?"

Zachary nodded. "Run the Paradise Funeral Parlors—only establishment of its kind in town," he added proudly.

Long Jim glanced at the coffins. "Anticipatin' a lot of business?"

Zachary shrugged. "Cain't tell," he observed solemnly. "Apache Wells is primed fer trouble. They's a heap of *dinero* locked up in the bank, an' Bighead Nevens an' his killers are rumored to be hidin' out in these hills. Sheriff Cal Caulkins is as nervous as an old maid with a man under her bed. . . ." He clucked at his team.

"Nope—ain't no tellin' what'll happen in Apache Wells no more. Not with the Perfessor spoutin' talk 'bout the power of the hooman eye an' makin' faces at thet tiger he's got caged—"

"The Perfessor?"

"Yep. Calls hisself Perfessor Eccleston. Rolled into town 'bout a week back. Claims he's the inventor of a tonic thet'll make a rabbit step up an' kick his tiger in the teeth after a couple of snorts." Zachary shrugged. "Gents who've tried it says it tastes like pizen juice an' giant powder combined."

"Cripes!" marveled Windy, and Long Jim guffawed.

"Sounds like Apache Wells'll be mighty interestin'." Long Jim said. "Well—mebbe we'll be seein' yuh, Zach. Adios!"

THE TRAIL into Apache Wells curled among tawny rocks scattered haphazardly on the plateau, as if giants had sown them when the world was young. Where the trail dipped down toward town, Windy and Long Jim were halted by a stocky, black-whiskered hombre who stepped abruptly out from behind a rock.

"Howdy, strangers," he greeted them. But he didn't look friendly. And the rifle in his hands was pointed their way. "Goin' into town?"

Windy sighed and looked at Long Jim. Then he looked back to the guardian of the trail. "You objectin'?

"Mebbe," the man said. He looked them over casually, eyed the patient Blinky, and came to the conclusion they were harmless. Shifting his tobacco into his left cheek he turned and nearly drowned a curious lizard that came out of a crevice to investigate.

"Guess yo're all right," he said judiciously. "When yuh see the sheriff tell him I'm waitin' for my relief—will yuh?"

"Sure," Long Jim said. They rode on. Evidently the sheriff at Apache Wells was taking no chances of a surprise raid by Nevens and his outlaws.

There were few men in this section of the Southwest who had not heard of Bighead Nevens. A man with a huge, lion-maned head and enormous shoulders, he could run down a wild horse and break its neck with his huge hands, according to rumor. Some of the tales told around chuckwagon and across bars rivalled those of the legendary Pecos Bill. However it may be, more than one lawman filled a shallow grave because of the outlaw chief. Small wonder the sheriff in Apache Wells was worried, with Nevens in the neighborhood.

The trail veered away from a low, crumbly-faced butte, and it was here that Long Jim and Windy had their first glimpse of the town ahead.

Just beyond the butte Long Lost Creek made a bend and doubled back on itself. Most of the year the creek was a dry bed of sand and stones—but repeated flood waters had ground out a narrow, deep canyon. Enclosed within this loop, which formed an effective moat on three sides, lay Apache Wells. Behind the town Copperhead Mesa rose forbiddingly.

There was only one bridge into town, a makeshift drawbridge, and it was up when they came to it. Some ingenious soul had engineered a crude cantilever affair, powered by a team of horses. The two wanderers could see the animals, standing patiently in the hot sun by the windlass. To their left a leanto cast shade over an old character who sat with a corncob in his mouth and a shotgun across his knees.

"How do we get across?" yelled Windy.

The character stirred. A wrinkled face peered at them from under a floppy hat. He took the corncob from his mouth and spat into the dust. Then he shuffled to the patient horses. Grasping the nearest by the headstall he began to back them in a circle around the windlass.

The bridge came down, creaking and groaning, and settled with a thud.

Long Jim and Windy rode across. The oldster held out a palm. "Thet'll be two-bits, gents."

Windy frowned. "Thet's highway robbery—"

"Yuh mean bridge robbery!" Long Jim snapped. "We won't pay!"

The old character shifted the shotgun muzzle. "Two bits!" he repeated.

Long Jim paid him.

The bridge-tender tested the coin between tobacco-stained stubs of teeth. Nodding, he said: "Good luck to yer," and went back to the waiting animals.

Long Jim and Windy swung away, hearing the bridge creak as the plodding team drew it up again.

Apache Wells' first jerrybuilt structures began a hundred yards from the bridge. Windy and Long Jim turned left into a wide, dusty street some wit had named "Custer's Avenue," and paused to survey the structures sprawled on either side of them.

A score of warped frame-buildings, most of them false-fronted, baked in the late morning sun. At the far end Apache Wells petered out into boxlike, adobe huts, cracked and baked into a composite of dust and filth hung with crimson banners of chili. Behind the false fronts they glimpsed broken corrals, littered lots with burros browsing on tin cans, a horde of ragged children playing alongside pigs staked out to wallow in mire and empty sheds sagging away from the wind.

Windy shook his head. "If Custer had seen this," he remarked, "he would never have made his last stand."

A coyote dog with a floppy ear came out of an alley to greet them. Blinky, the burro, cocked a watchful eye at the yipping canine. Blinky was distrustful by nature and hated town dogs by instinct.

"Shore cain't understand why Jeffries settled in this excuse for a town," added Windy. "Must have—"

"Let's find Cassidy's first," interrupted Long Jim hastily. "We'll ask 'bout Hardpan after we eat."

They rode down Custer Avenue until Long Jim suddenly pointed to a one story shack wedged between two false-fronted structures with the imposing names of Gertie Lou's Silver Palace and The Riviera. "There's Cassidy's."

They drew up at the rail and dropped reins over the bar. Blinky brayed raucously and Long Jim turned and said: "Shet up, yuh long-eared jackass! We'll bring yuh some beans."

They turned—and halted.

Windy's nose was two inches from a long-barreled Colt .45. His eyes traveled from the front sight along seven inches of barrel to a horny thumb clicking back a spike hammer. Then his gaze lifted to the slight man with the white goatee and the sheriff's star on his gravy-stained vest. The lawman had a tic under his right eye.

"All right, hombres!" he squeaked, winking rapidly. "Shed yore hardware!"

WINDY raised a hand in protest. "Yuh got us wrong, Sheriff. We're jest a couple of peaceful—"

"Whitey!" the sheriff snapped rudely, not waiting for Windy to finish. "Git up off yer hind end an' relieve these galoots of their hardware!"

A long human with a young, slack-jawed face and a mop of white hair unfolded himself from a chair propped against the Riviera's shaded front and came toward them. He shuffled like an old hound dog coming to its master after losing a rabbit.

"Kee-ripes!" he said, drawing Windy's Colt from the bantam's holster. "Li'l big fer yuh, ain't it, grandpa?"

Windy bristled. "Lissen, yuh spavined yearlin'—I was handlin' a shootin' iron 'fore yer ma made her mistake—"

"Shet up!" the sheriff said.

Windy looked at the sixgun tickling his nose and shut up. Whitey relieved Long Jim of his weapon, clucked at the weight of the heavy Frontier and turned to the sheriff. "Want 'em put with the others, Cal?"

Sheriff Caulkins nodded. "Take their rifles, too," he reminded.

Long Jim scowled. "Yer makin' a mistake, sheriff. We ain't owlhooters."

The sheriff winked solemnly. "Cain't afford to take no chances—"

"Not with fifty thousand American pesos in thet two-by-four bank," grinned Whitey. Then he looked at the sheriff's scowling features and shrugged defensively. "Aw—what the hell, Cal—they're oney a pair of

saddle bums. Yuh kin see thet with half an eye—"

"That's all you ever see outta!" the sheriff snapped. "An' yuh think like yuh had haffa brain!"

Whitey grunted and dragged himself away toward a 'dobe building across the street with iron-barred windows and a sign: Sheriff's Office, Apache County. Cal Caulkins, Sheriff.

"Lawd!" the sheriff said, raising his eyes heavenward. "The commissioners shore put one over on us when they wished thet long-laiged son of an addled jackrabbit on me fer a deppity."

"The good Lawd shore had somethin' on his mind when you was made sheriff!" Windy snapped. "What's the idea of the hocus-pocus with our hardware? We're free an' innocent citizens—seekin' to earn a honest livin'—"

"Yo're free awright," the sheriff admitted, stepping back and holstering his Colt. "As long as yuh make no wrong moves. As tuh bein' innocent—" He looked them over carefully, his right eye winking disconcertingly—"I reserve my jedgement."

He waved a hand down the street to a squat adobe and frame structure. "The town's yourn—but keep away from the bank. I'm plumb nervous about thet theah institution. If yuh've come to stay—yo're welcome. If you wanna leave—come to my office. I'll see thet you get yore hardware back an' are personally escorted to the bridge."

He left them open-mouthed and staring, until Blinky's raucous braying shattered the stillness, reminding them it was time to eat again.

CASSIDY'S was long and narrow with a lunch counter fronted by wobbly wooden stools. Cassidy was like his place, long and narrow. He was hunched over the cigar box that served as cash register, chewing on an unlighted cheroot. The counter man was a young, serious-faced fellow who took food from the small kitchen opening where a Mex cook alternately swore and sang over his pots and pans.

Windy climbed onto a stool and looked up at the pencil-printed menu tacked on the wall behind the counter. Long Jim slid a leg across another, frowning at the lightness of his empty holster.

The youngster slid them each a glass of water. "What you havin' gents?"

"Chicken," Windy said. "Ain't had a good drumstick to chaw on since Saint Looie."

The youngster yelled the order to the cook and received a voluble answer generously sprinkled with "carambas!" "No chicken," he said, turning and picking up a pencil to draw a line through that item on the menu.

Windy scowled. Long Jim said: "I'll have the T-bone steak, lots of hashed brown potatoes, an'—"

The youngster barked the order. Again the Mex answered. "No steak," the youngster said, reaching up and drawing another line.

Windy and Long Jim looked at one another, then glanced at Cassidy. The lunchroom owner shrugged helplessly.

"Make it two orders of pork chops an'—"

The swarthy-faced cook stuck his head through the opening and surveyed them with great deliberateness before answering the counter man.

"I know," Windy snarled as the man turned to them. "No chops!"

"What'n hell *have* yuh got?" rasped Long Jim testily.

The counter man shrugged. "Everythin'. But Sancho is temper'mental. He cooks what he wants. If he says no chops—" the youngster spread his hands—"there's no chops."

"Somebuddy's liable to sprinkle his temper'ment with lead," growled Windy.

"Ask him what he's got back there," said Long Jim.

The youngster got his answer. "Enchiladas," he said calmly. "An' frijoles."

"We'll take 'em!" Long Jim said before Windy could open his mouth. Windy shrugged and glanced at Cassidy. "How's business?"

"Gone to hell," Cassidy replied morosely.

"No wonder," said Long Jim sympathetically. "With a cook like thet—"

"It's not Sancho," Cassidy explained. "It's thet wanderin' medicine show gent. Used to be a time when the men an' women of Apache Wells could stow away victuals like any healthy citizen. Place used to be choked at every meal hour. Then this Perfessor showed up with his mangy tiger an'

his 'Tigro' tonic. Ain't a man had any appetite since they been guzzlin' thet stuff. . . ."

Windy scratched his side whiskers in sympathy. The counterman came up with their orders and Sancho poked his head through the opening. The sweat rolled down his coffee-with-cream face and formed little drops at the ends of his long black mustache. He showed white teeth in a grin. *"Buena fortuna, amigos,"* he said.

Windy paused with a forkload poised in midair. "Mebbe we'll need it," he muttered suspiciously. He took a bite, rolled it around in his mouth, and started to swallow. His face stiffened. He gagged and grabbed for his coffee mug. The coffee was hot and burned his lips, but it was not as hot as the fire in his mouth.

Long Jim looked concernedly at him. Seeing the tears roll down Windy's face he slapped him heartily on the back. "What's the matter?" he asked solicitously. "Eat too fast?"

Windy regained his breath. He swiveled off his seat and started for the kitchen. "I'm gonna break thet fire-settin' son's—"

Jim clamped a big hand on Windy's shoulder and hauled him back. "Take it easy," he said mildly. "Ain't no sense runnin' wild. This is the best enchilada I ever et."

The youngster leaned on his elbows and grinned at the spluttering oldster. "What's the matter, grandpop? Can't yuh take a li'l pepper in yore grub?"

"That ain't all I can't take!" snapped Windy. "Any more of yore sass an' I'll come behind that counter an' stuff you through thet hole into the kitchen!"

The youngster grinned. "All, right, grandpop." He got up and walked to a customer who came in and plunked himself down on a stool near the wall.

Windy rolled a smoke and watched Long Jim stow away the fiery enchiladas and frijoles. Cassidy said: "Strangers in town?"

Windy nodded. "Dropped in to look up a friend. Mebbe you kin tell us where Hardpan Jeffries hangs his hat?"

The question had a remarkably quieting effect on the others. Cassidy's jaw fell open and his cigar dangled from a pendulous lower lip, the youngster paused while yelling his order to Sancho, and the customer stiffened on his stool and stared curiously at them.

Windy frowned. "You'd think I was askin' about a ghost—"

The youngster recovered first. "Yo're right, grandpop," he said quickly. "Jeffries *is* a ghost!"

Long Jim pushed his plate away and scowled. Windy's eyes went hard. "We've had a lot of hoorawin' since hittin' this town," he said quietly, and every man in that lunchroom felt the danger in that little man then—"from bridge robbers, winkin' sheriffs an' smart-alecky deppities down to temper'mental cooks. But when it comes to Jeffries we quit playin'. Now come again, button—an' hold a tight loop on yore tongue. Where is my old friend, Hardpan Jeffries?"

The youngster's eyes grew serious. "Prob'bly assayin' rocks in hell," he replied coldly.

Cassidy cut in quickly. "Hardpan's shack is outta town 'bout four miles. Under the mesa. He useta come in here, until he disappeared, a month ago."

"Disappeared?"

Cassidy nodded. "Last time he was in here Len here"—he jerked his head to the youngster—"staked him to a couple of weeks grub. Wasn't the first time Len staked him either. He went out, promisin' to buy Len a string of lunchrooms, an' never showed up again around Apache Wells."

Long Jim and Windy turned cold eyes on Len Stevens. The youngster's lips tightened. "If yo're gettin' ideas I might have killed Hardpan, yuh might just as well forget 'em right now."

"Nobody knows fer shore if Hardpan is dead," Cassidy said quickly. "But some of the boys swear his ghost talks, if the moon is right. . . ."

Windy plunked silver down on the counter and swung off his stool. "That's enough!" he snapped. "Come on, Jim—let's get out of heah."

Long Jim gulped down the last of his coffee and slid off his stool. He turned to look at Cassidy. "Hardpan was a friend of ours," he said levelly, "an' ghost or no ghost we're goin' callin'. If somethin's happened to him we'll be back—" he looked at the youngster—"to send him company in hell!"

CHAPTER TWO

Enter the Tigro Tycoon

THE sheriff watched them ride out of town, heading for the mesa. He had just come out of the bank after reassuring himself things were as they should be in that institution, with Whitey following at his heels. The deputy followed his gaze. "Funny pair of galoots, Cal. Wonder what they're up to?"

"Keep an eye on them!" growled the sheriff, and headed for the Riviera. "Damn the hull cussed setup!" he mumbled. "Sam Bainter oughta have his head examined, depositin' thet much dinero in this bank. Bait for every owlhooter this side the Platte, that's what it is."

He was still mumbling as he brushed aside the batwings of the Riviera, a squat, warped structure with a front that looked down the squalor of Custer Avenue and a rear view that included a littered back lot, a stretch of desolate desert and distant, rocky hills. Penn Trimble, the owner, had read a book once, mentioning the glories of the French Riviera and with the innocence of the thoroughly uninformed, pounced on the name for his establishment which in an earlier period had been simply, but more fittingly, named Trimble's Saloon.

Sheriff Caulkins shuffled to the bar and hook a heel over the rail. He held up two fingers, indicating his usual midafternoon snort. Trimble, a dirty white apron billowing over an enormous paunch, eyed him sleepily from the end of the bar. There were few customers in the saloon at this hour, for which Trimble heartily cursed the Professor and his cure-all libation: Tigro.

"Get it yoreself, Sheriff."

He was hunched over the counter, his thick joweled face resting in his hands. Cal went around the bar, found his brand of whiskey, and poured himself a drink. Then he found the credit pad under the counter, made his mark beside his name, and came back to the front of the bar. He drank his whiskey like a customer, foot on the rail.

Trimble roused himself. "When you gonna run that faker outta town, Sheriff?" he demanded for the sixtieth time, and the sheriff shrugged and answered "This heah is a free an' undivided country, Penn. The Perfessor has a legal right to set up business in Apache Wells, long as he minds his own doin's, an' doesn't misinform the public—"

"What in hell you call that sulphurwater he's peddlin'?" rumbled Penn. "That stuff ain't fit for anythin' but to thin varnish—"

"Ain't had no complaints yit," Cal said, unmoved. "Some of the boys seem right perked up since they been takin' Tigro." He scowled into his glass. "'Sides, I got other things on my mind, Penn. I ben losin' hair ever since Sam Bainter sold his V-Bar-2 spread to thet syndicate an' deposited the cash in our local institution—"

He turned and glanced at the man who entered. "Wal, howdy, Perfessor," he welcomed. "We was talkin' about yuh. Lean an elbow on the bar an' have a snort."

Professor Eccleston, who signed his name with a half dozen abbreviated designations trailing, brightened at this unexpected welcome from the law. He was a tall, impressive figure in a Prince Albert coat, slightly frayed at the cuffs, a black silk hat, white shirt, black string tie, melon kid gloves and malacca walking stick. He had a cast iron larynx, a cast iron stomach, and he held his liquor like a gentleman.

"Glad to drink with a gentleman of the law any time," he said, advancing to the bar. He had a sonorous voice. Trimble scowled. The few loungers glanced up and fell asleep again.

Cal said: "Bring out that bottle, Penn—my special brand. Drinks are on me." And this time the mountainous saloon-keeper obeyed, grumbling as he poured.

The Professor sipped the amber liquid. "The libation of kings," he said, rolling his tongue around in his mouth. "Almost as good as my special potion, Tigro. Now there's a drink for you, sheriff. One bottle at my special closing offer of a dollar sixty-five and—"

"Closin'?" Trimble broke in, hopefully. "You leavin' Apache Wells?"

The Professor nodded. "Tomorrow. Can't play favorites, you know. Blind Corners is waiting impatiently for its share of my super tonic—"

"Glory be!" Trimble growled. He clamped a thick, sweaty hand around the bottle and poured. "On the house!" he said generously.

Cal eyed him suspiciously, for Trimble had a reputation for being close-fisted. The

Professor savored his drink, smacked his lips with pleasure, then flipped the rest of it down his throat with a flick of his wrist.

"You are a gentleman and a scholar, Mister Trimble," he said, setting his glass down on the bar. "To show you my appreciation I'm going to give to you, absolutely free, a sample bottle of Tigro." He reached into a capacious pocket and hauled out a small, stoppered bottle of a bilious green liquid that clouded as he shook it. "Should you want more I can be found at my rolling pharmaceutical establishment now parked in Baker's lot. . . ."

He paid for the next round, bought a bottle of Cal's brand of whiskey, and turned away. Trimble watched him go, the bottle of Tigro still in his hand.

Pansy came down the bar top, stepping gingerly over the wet spots, her tail held high. She sniffed at the Professor's empty glass and ran a red tongue down into it. Her ears straightened and she made a pleased, rumbling sound in her throat.

Trimble said: "Scat! you drunken teline!" and waved his thick arm at her. Pansy backed away, watching him, meowing like a bum begging for a drink.

"She ain't been the same since Gertie Lou's big tom got hisself shot, yeowlin' on Cassidy's back fence." Trimble growled. "Now she takin' to drink—"

Cal pushed the boozy feline away from his glass. "Jest like a woman," he growled out of the deep conviction of bachelor experience.

The cat humped its back and spat at him, then turned and rubbed her ear against Trimble's hairy arm. She sniffed expectantly at the bottle of Tigro.

Trimble's thick eyebrows made sudden Vs as a thought parted his scalp. He ducked below the counter and found the small bowl he kept his change in. He scooped out the coins, set the bowl on the counter, and poured the bottle of Tigro into it.

"Go ahead, Pansy," he said generously, thrusting the bowl under her nose. Cal hunched himself over and watched.

The gray-striped cat eyed Trimble suspiciously. Then she dipped her head and sniffed. Her tail wagged sideways. She glanced up at the paunchy saloonkeeper with a trace of uneasiness in her eyes, then she decided to take a chance.

She took a half dozen quick laps at the liquid, paused, lapped again, then sat back on the counter as if a hand had come out of the bowl and pushed her in the face. She sat there, drops of Tigro dripping from her whiskers, for about a second. Then she went straight up in the air with an ear-splitting yeowl and came down running, streaking across the saloon and vanishing under the batwings.

Trimble leaned back. "See what I mean, Cal?"

Cal drew the bowl to him and sniffed at its contents. Then he shook his head. "Mebbe it ain't meant for felines," he observed, plucking at his goatee. "Leastwise, not for a lady like Pansy."

PROFESSOR ECCLESTON'S covered show wagon was parked in the empty lot behind Baker's Hay & Grain Store. A weathered canvas awning shaded a box which the Professor mounted to deliver his "lectures." The tiger's cage, on wheels, was drawn up close to the awning, and supported one end of the cloth sign:

DRINK TIGRO: THE MAGIC ELIXIR
Brought to you from the heart of Darkest Africa
Trial size $2.00 Monthly supply $10.00

Windy pulled up before the wagon and peered in at the tiger asleep in a corner of its cage. The Professor was nowhere in sight, evidently preferring to deliver his sales talks in the cool of the evening.

Long Jim gravely surveyed the outfit. "Looks like the show we heard about in Tucson, Windy. If it is, things'll prob'bly start poppin' 'round here."

Windy shrugged. "Not our truck, Jim. Anyway, we're plumb dehorned." He dropped his hand to his empty holster and scowled. "Damn thet suspicious badge-toter!"

They swung away, following a wagon rut that lead them toward the mesa. The road finally lost itself in brush along a dry watercourse, but they could see the lone shack close under the cliff, and they struck out for it.

The door was open when they got there, sagging on its one hinge. Sand drifted in over the framing. The board sides were gray and warped. A packrat ran out as they

dismounted, ground-reining their animals. Blinky paused behind them and dozed.

The interior of the shack was crudely furnished. An empty box and some nail kegs had served Hardpan for table and chairs. There was a small wood stove in a corner, its rusted stove pipe piercing the ceiling.

Long Jim walked to the oil lamp sitting on the box and touched the soot on the inside of the glass. There was dust everywhere in the cabin, but there were boot marks on the floor and crumbs by the box.

"Either Jeffries' ghost, or some other varmint, has been usin' this shack recently," said Long Jim, scowling. They went out and stood by their horses, undecided, not knowing what to do. They hadn't seen Hardpan in a long time, but if he had been killed they wanted to know who had done it.

It was quiet under the mesa, and a breeze sprinkled sand through the open door as they stood there. Behind them the sun was going down. It cast their shadows long against the cliff.

"Nothin' we kin do here," observed Windy, reaching into his pocket for the remnants of his plug cut.

"Nothin' we kin do here!" floated down the echo from the mesa.

Windy stiffened. "Huh?"

"Huh?" said the echo.

Long Jim and Windy both looked at the sheer, tawny wall. There was nothing to see.

Windy gulped. "Hardpan!" he called.

"Hardpan!" came the echo.

"Are you dead?"

"Course I'm dead!" snapped the echo.

Windy blinked. Long Jim's jaw dropped. "Cassidy was right. A talkin' ghost!"

Windy backed to his roan and mounted, keeping his eyes on the cliff. "Who killed yuh, Hardpan?" he asked from the safety of his saddle.

"Trimble's likker," said the echo.

It ended with that. Despite several further attempts at conversation Jeffries' ghost remained silent.

Confused, the two drifters rode back to Apache Wells.

THE Professor was on his stand when they got back, haranguing a growing crowd on the "power of the human eye" and the many miraculous merits of Tigro.

Long Jim and Windy paused on the edges of the crowd. The tiger was pacing in his cage, a soundless, impatient shuffle that touched the chords of pity in the two men.

". . . brought to you with great personal expense and danger from the jungles of Kenya. . . ."

Windy scowled at the Professor's booming voice. "I'll stick to the rotgut they serve in the Riviera." They swung away. Rounding the corner into Custer Avenue they headed uptown, passing Sheriff Caulkins, sitting watchfully on a box across the street from the now closed bank. The sheriff eyed them with deep suspicion as they jogged by.

They drew rein at the Riviera and Blinky suddenly began to bray. "All right, yuh long-eared foghorn!" growled Long Jim. "I'll get yuh some more beans."

Windy looked at him. "You gonna eat again?"

"Might have a bite," admitted Long Jim. "An' Blinky's hungry. I'll meet you at the bar inside a half hour."

Windy snorted. "I don't know who is worse—you or thet jackass!" he growled, turning to the Riviera's slatted doors.

Long Jim went into Cassidy's. Sancho's temperament had changed. Long Jim could now have everything on the menu. He readily ordered steak and potatoes and a side dish of beans for Blinky.

Cassidy eyed him glumly from the end of the counter. "Didja talk to Jeffries' ghost?"

Jim nodded. "Talkingest spirit I ever jawed with. If thet was Hardpan's ghost he talks more now than he ever did when he was alive."

Len Stevens looked at him with unfriendly eyes. "See anythin' at Hardpan's place?"

"Didn't look around much," Long Jim said. "Place looked like it had been empty for a long time." He got off his stool, paid for his meal, and took Blinky's beans out. He put the dish down before the burro.

"Somethin's crooked in this heah setup, Blinky," he muttered. He heard a voice call the sheriff and he looked up. He was behind Blinky and Windy's roan and not readily seen from across the street.

Zachary Stack, the undertaker they had met on the trail, was standing in the door-

way of his establishment. Sheriff Caulkins, across the avenue and further down, got up and headed his way. They talked for a few moments in front of the funeral parlors, then the sheriff shrugged and went inside with the undertaker.

Long Jim frowned. "Mebbe the sheriff kin tell us more of what happened to Hardpan than Cassidy let out. An' thet youngster in there warn't too free with his talk either."

He patted Blinky and crossed the street. Apache Wells brooded in the dusk, looking like some ghost town. Long Jim paused in the doorway of the Paradise Funeral Parlors.

Somewhere inside a heavy voice was saying: ". . . mind the deppity—we'll take care of—"

The voice chopped off as Long Jim called: "Sheriff!" Long Jim frowned as he crossed the small front room that was empty except for a few pieces of stuffed furniture. Heavy green drapes hung in a rear doorway. Long Jim struck his head through the drapes and said: "Sheriff—"

He didn't even grunt as the Colt butt dented his hat. A thick-shouldered figure caught him as he fell. . . .

WINDY finished his third shot of Trimble's "special" and wiped his mustache with the back of his hand. He reached inside his shirt pocket for his tobacco sack as Trimble set them up again. The sun was red against the dirty windows, splashing in long streamers across the saloon floor.

"You believe in ghosts?" he asked Trimble.

The saloon-keeper shrugged. "What kind of ghosts?"

"Talkin' ghosts?"

Trimble leaned on his elbows and shook his head. "Nope. Ghosts are the spirit substance of dead men—an' dead men don't talk." He frowned at Windy. "Yuh ben hearin' stories about Jeffries' ghost?"

Windy nodded. "Didn't believe it, when I heard the story in Cassidy's. But I rode out there an' heard it talk. It was Jeffries' voice awright." Windy spat out shreds of tobacco. "Said it was yore likker that killed him."

Trimble looked indignant. "Goes to show yuh even ghosts have no gratitude today. Hardpan chiseled more free likker from me, 'fore he disappeared, than most men buy—"

He looked up as Whitey came in, shuffling up to the bar. The deputy looked worried. He said: "Seen the sheriff, Penn?"

"Not lately," Trimble said. "Not since he left here 'bout one o'clock. Why?"

Whitey tapped the side of his long nose, an unconscious gesture when under strain. "Ain't like Cal to keep out of sight of the bank. I don't like it, Penn."

Trimble shook his head. Yo're gettin' as fidgety as Cal. 'Nother year an'—"

"Too quiet!" Whitey cut in. He looked at Windy. "Town's too quiet. Most of the folks are down in Baker's lot, lissenin' to the Perfessor—"

"Forget it!" growled Trimble. "Ain't anyone kin git into town without us knowin' it. Cal's got men watchin' every trail. An' Tully, at the bridge, has his orders. Nothin' to worry about, Whitey!"

"Mebbe yo're right," Whitey said, scratching his head. "I'll take a small one, Penn."

Windy downed his drink. He was getting peeved at Long Jim. He was taking an uncommonly long time with his chow.

"I'll tell the sheriff yo're lookin' for him," he said to Whitey as he swung away—"if I run into him."

Blinky brayed a welcome as he approached. Windy paused at the hitchrack and eyed the clean dish in front of the burro. Scowling, he stepped into Cassidy's.

"Seen my long-legged pard around?"

"Was in here. Left 'bout five minnits ago."

Windy walked out and paused on the boardwalk. The wide street was deserted. A man appeared in the doorway of the Paradise Funeral Parlors and ducked back inside.

Windy frowned. He felt trouble in the gathering dusk, felt it in his bones, like he felt the approach of winter. The lightness at his right hip annoyed him.

Law or no law, he thought, I'm going to get my shooting iron. Don't feel right without it.

He crossed the street and angled to the squat 'dobe building with the barred windows. He tried the door but it was locked.

"Hey!" a voice called from behind him. "You lookin' fer somethin', grandpap?"

Whitey came walking across the street toward him, his hand on his gun butt.

Windy waited until he reached the law office. "I'm leavin' this cussed town," he said. "I want my shootin' iron."

Whitey grinned. "Okay, pop." He unlocked the door and Windy followed him inside. Windy's Colt was on the littered desk, beside Long Jim's. The deputy said: "Pick yore piece, pop."

Windy slid his Colt into holster and the weight at his hip eased something inside him.

"Yore partner leavin' with yuh?"

Windy nodded. Whitey turned to the rifle rack where he had stacked Long Jim's buffalo gun. "Ain't seen a cannon like this since—"

Windy put a hand on his shoulder and pulled the deputy around. "You ain't seen anythin' yet," he snapped, hooking the muzzle of his Colt into Whitey's lean stomach.

He reached around and pulled the astonished lawman's Colt from holster and tossed it on the desk. He stepped back, making a slight motion with his Colt. "Get into that back room—"

Whitey's mouth snapped shut. "Lissen, yuh old fool!" he said grimly. "Put away that gun 'fore I—"

He made a sudden lunge for Windy. The oldster chopped down with his Colt and Whitey fell. Windy stood over the deputy's limp body, shaking his head. "Ain't no fool like a young 'un. . . ."

He trussed the deputy and gagged him with his neckerchief. He found keys in the lawman's pocket and one of them opened the rear door. A single barred window in the bare back room indicated it served as temporary jail. He dragged Whitey inside, draped his long frame across a cot, and came out, locking the door behind him.

The weight of his .45 felt good against his thigh. He thrust Jim's Colt in his belt, where it was hidden by the skirt of his shapeless coat. Assuming an innocent air, he left the law office and sauntered down the street.

CHAPTER THREE

Sundown in Spirit

GERTIE LOU came out of her office and glumly surveyed the empty interior of the Silver Palace. Business had fallen to almost zero since Professor Eccleston's arrival in the vicinity of Apache Wells.

Gertie felt indignation mount within her ample bosom. If that faker remained in town another week, every honest establishment in Apache Wells would go broke.

She made her way to the bar where a meek, lantern-jawed man was polishing the cherry wood bar by the window and staring dreamily into the street.

"Jerry!"

The bartender jumped, and automatically began to polish faster. Then he sidled over to where she waited impatiently.

"Make me one of those cherry specials," she snapped. "And don't forget to put in the lemon like that whiskey drummer showed you."

Jerry nodded. Things were going to the dogs in Apache Wells he thought sadly. Used to be a time when Gertie drank her whiskey straight, like any decent person.

He dropped the cherry into the concoction and set it on the bar in front of her. "Ben feelin' a mite low lately, Gertie," he said absently. "Mebbe a shot of that tonic, Tigro, might perk me up a bit—"

"*Tigro!*" Gertie's voice blasted his eardrums. "If you mention that in here once more I'll stuff you into a beer keg!" She shook an admonishing finger at the cringing barman. "What you need is to quit sneaking drinks behind my back. Next time I catch yuh guzzling out of my private bottle I'll perk you up, without benefit of that sulphurwater called Tigro!"

She had another drink, then wandered back to her office. She stared moodily at the picture of a stern, thick-mustached man over her desk. "Things ain't been the same, Jeff," she said discontentedly, "since yuh left me. People are always trying to take advantage of frail females like me."

Gertie was five feet eleven in her shoes and weighed one hundred and ninety pounds. She was her own bouncer, and she discharged her duties effectively. But it pleased her to take on a humble dependence in her soliloquies with the picture of her departed husband.

She pulled open her drawer and took out a bottle of rye. In the privacy of her office habit reasserted itself. She sighed heavily and tipped the bottle to her lips.

The batwings creaked as she was slipping the bottle back into the drawer. The sound picked up her spirits. A customer!

She opened the door and looked out. There was no one at the bar, nor anyone behind it. For a moment she stared uncomprehendingly.

"Jerry!" she called.

But there was no answer. Jerry had evidently gone to Baker's lot for a bottle of Tigro.

It was too much. Gertie Lou turned back to her office, paused to jam a flower-decked straw hat on her head and to check the derringer in the holster strapped to her thigh, under her skirt, and came out with blood in her eye, heading for Baker's lot. . . .

WINDY wandered around town looking for Long Jim. His long-legged partner's cayuse was still at the lunchroom hitchrack, so Long Jim could not have left Apache Wells.

The shadows were lengthening in the dusty street when he came back to Cassidy's. Penn Trimble pushed through the Riviera doors and stood on the stoop, staring into the deserted street. He nodded at Windy, then waddled back inside.

The youngster who dished out the chow in Cassidy's came outside for a smoke. He said, "Find him yet?" and Windy shook his head. He stood by Long Jim's gray, feeling the silence, the hushed stillness in this part of town.

Something was cooking in Apache Wells, and it annoyed him. After a while the youngster went back inside the lunchroom and Windy walked across the street, heading for the end of town where the Professor was holding forth.

A huge-shouldered man filled the doorway of the Paradise Funeral Parlors, then ducked back inside as Windy approached. A moment later the undertaker appeared in the doorway, smoking his corncob. He said: "Howdy," as Windy passed. Windy nodded and kept walking.

Practically all of Apache Wells' four hundred inhabitants were clustered about the Professor's wagon show. Windy paused on the edge of the crowd and looked for Long Jim. He walked around until he could see the tiger's cage.

The big cat was still pacing with tireless energy. Every so often it paused to snarl at the crowd, wrinkling black lips back from a gap-toothed jaw. One yellowed fang remained of its original four, and its striped coat hung loosely over its gaunt frame.

The Professor was making his final point which always fascinated the citizenry, before actually putting Tigro on sale. ". . . . will now demonstrate the power of the human eye, as developed by the regular use of Tigro, the marvelous African herb medicine. To show you I believe in my own sales talk, I will drink before your very eyes, a sample bottle of Tigro. Then I will step to this cage, where you all can see Leopold, the man-killing tiger from India, and I shall endeavor to quell this ferocious beast with nothing more than a stare. I will prove to you the power of the human eye—"

He paused to watch a bosomy, angry woman who came pushing through the crowd.

Gertie Lou cleared the inner ring of spectators and found herself within a foot of the tiger's cage. The door was held closed by a simple hasp, with a peg pushed through it. The Professor had never felt the need of a padlock.

"Madam," he admonished sharply as Gertie eyed the hasp. "I must advise you to keep away from Leopold. He has clawed more than one curious spectator—"

"He has, has he?" sneered Gertie. With a quick motion she reached up and pulled the peg free. Swinging the door open she stepped back, her voice blaring belligerently: "Get out of there, you mangy tomcat!"

A curious fascination, compounded of fear and shock, held that gathering immobile. The tiger crouched. He was an old cat who had been in captivity so long he had forgotten what freedom was. In the stillness of that moment his long tail thumped audibly on the wooden floor. Then he snarled, soundlessly, and paced to the door.

The crowd disrupted into fleeing units, as if expelled by centrifugal force into the alleys leading to Custer Avenue.

Leopold hesitated in the doorway. Gertie was backing up, clawing under her dress for her pistol. "Get away from me, you moth-eaten parlor rug—"

The tiger jumped down. She fired, and missed. But the sharp crack sent the tiger cringing under the wagon. Someone let go with a shaky .45. The bullet gouged

splinters from a rear wheel, and sent the frightened cat bounding toward the darkness of the near alley.

In the pandemonium that followed no one paid any attention to the heavy charge that blew open the bank's safe, nor noticed the half dozen hard-eyed outlaws who broke out of the bank and ran down the street to the Paradise Funeral Parlors.

DUSK settled swiftly over a tense Apache Wells. Women barricaded their doors and windows while trigger-happy men took pot shots at everything that moved.

Windy moved cautiously out of the darkness of an alley and started across the street for Cassidy's. A stentorian voice bellowed in the distance: "There he is—headin' cross the street—" and a flurry of shots whistled his way.

Windy cursed as he ducked into the shadows and ran along the walk to the lighted window of the Paradise Funeral Parlors. He found the door bolted, and pounded on it.

The undertaker opened the door. Windy shoved past him, and Stack closed the door and turned. "What you want?" he demanded brusquely. "What's all the racket for?"

"The Perfessor's tiger's on the loose!" Windy growled. "Those crazy galoots are shootin' at every shadder that moves, an' even those thet don't. . . ."

Stack looked nervous. "Well, yuh can't stay here. Ain't got room for yuh—less'n yo're a corpse."

Windy nodded toward the rear room. "What's in there?"

"Coffins," the undertaker said. "Thet's where I do my embalmin'—"

He paused, and Windy frowned, as a peculiar drumming came from that inner room. Windy walked to the drapes and pushed them aside.

The workshop had a long bench with a sink and a handpump under an open window that faced a dark alley. There were buckets under the bench, a lighted oil lamp on a table and coffins arranged in a row at the far end of the room.

The drumming seemed to come from one of the coffins. Windy turned and motioned to the stiff-faced undertaker. "Sounds like one of yore customers don't like the way his box fits," he said casually.

Stack moved to him. "You must be hearin' things," he said, wetting his lips. "Ain't had a customer in here in over a week—"

He made a stab for his shoulder gun, and Windy jammed the muzzle of his gun with savage force into his stomach. The undertaker gasped. He started to wilt, his stovepipe hat tumbling from his head. Windy slashed him across the head with the side of his Colt and the undertaker collapsed, like an emptying wheat sack.

There was a moment of silence, then the drumming continued. Windy kept a grip on his Colt and paced to the musical box. The cover was not nailed on. Windy slid it off.

Long Jim, trussed and gagged, knees slightly doubled, glared up at him. A gurgle escaped through his gag.

Windy sat down on the edge of the casket, shaking his head in wonder. "I'll be damned," he said peevishly. "Looked all over town fer yuh. What you doin' in this box? Tryin' it on fer size?"

Long Jim's angry gurgling mingled with a faint rustling and tapping in another coffin. Windy's eyes widened. "Place is alive

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with 'em. . . ." Every coffin held a man.

He cut Long Jim free with a pocket knife and stepped back as his trail mate sat up and ripped the gag from his mouth. He waited until Long Jim finished rubbing circulation back into his arms and legs, then handed him his Colt.

Long Jim took it without question. He glanced at the unconscious undertaker, and started to back toward the door, motioning for Windy to follow.

"What's the matter?" Windy growled. "Lose yer tongue?"

Long Jim came up swiftly and clamped a hand over the bantam's mouth. "Shut up!" he whispered tightly. "We got to get out—"

Windy ripped the hand from his mouth. "What in hell you whisperin' for?" he asked loudly. "I ain't leavin' here tonight, Jim. Not with thet tiger runnin' around loose out there—"

He paused, sensing Long Jim stiffen against him. There was a sudden clattering among the coffins as covers were thrown aside. . . .

Bighead Nevens and his five killers stepped out of the caskets and ranged themselves along the wall near the open window. Drawn guns glinted menacingly in the lamplight.

"Don't know how you got wise to us," the bulky outlaw said angrily, "but I reck on we'll have to fit you two snoopers permanently into a couple of these boxes. . . ."

A volley of pistol and rifle shots, bursting in the street just outside the funeral parlors, interrupted him. A voice yelled: "There he goes!" and more shots slashed the stillness.

Bighead Nevens frowned. There was a quick, heavy padding in the alley under the window. The outlaw leader turned, his Colt cutting up. Two huge paws appeared on the sill, and a moment later a huge, black-striped head appeared in the opening. A pair of cruel, unblinking eyes stared into the room, freezing the six men nearest the window.

A shot whanged harshly down the alley and the big cat scrambled over the sill. It hesitated, forepaws on the rim of the sink, snarling defiance.

Nevens' slug ripped into its chest. The cat came off the sink in a long leap for the outlaw's throat. Nevens shot again, then went down with the big cat snarling over him.

The men behind Nevens scattered and broke for the door. Windy and Long Jim met the charge behind blazing guns.

MINUTES later Trimble, leading a party of riflemen, cautiously entered the Paradise Funeral Parlors and pushed aside the curtains of the inner room.

Gunsmoke was slowly filtering out through the alley window, like a dissipating fog.

The men paused, staring down at the tiger sprawled across Nevens' body. The outlaw chief's throat had been slashed open and blood made a thick, dark pool under him. In various positions around the room were other corpses.

Windy and Long Jim were sitting on a coffin. Windy's left arm hung limp, blood trickling down his fingers. Long Jim was tightening a neckerchief around the upper part of his arm to stop the bleeding.

Windy looked up. "Yuh came a little, gents. The *soiree's* over."

There was a sudden drumming inside the box they were on. Long Jim said: "Keeripes! I almost forgot!" He pulled Windy to his feet and pushed aside the cover. Reaching inside the coffin he pulled the gagged, goateed figure of Sheriff Caulkins into view.

"How'd he get in there?" snapped Windy.

"Same way I did," said Long Jim, cutting the gurgling lawman loose. "I follered him in here, after leavin' Cassidy's, thinkin' mebbe he knowed somethin' about Jeffries. Stuck my fool head through those curtains an' someone slammed it with a .45—"

The sheriff ripped the gag from his mouth and worked his aching jaws. There was a lump the size of a small egg on his partially bald head.

Trimble said: "Looks like a massacre." He walked to the tiger and nudged the dead animal with his foot. Recognition slackened his heavy face. "I'll be damned! It's Bighead Nevens hisself!"

Someone poked around the coffins and came up with a couple of small canvas sacks full of greenbacks and specie. "Holy jumpin' catfish!" he said. "They must have busted the bank an' we didn't even know it!"

The sheriff finally got his tongue working. "Bunch of nitwits!" he snapped. "Hull town's full of nitwits. Where's Whitey?"

Windy said: "Takin' things easy in yore office." He tossed the sheriff his keys. "You'll find him in the back room—"

"How in hell did Nevens an' his bunch git into town without one of the trail guards givin' the alarm?" asked Cassidy. He had just come in and was staring at the bodies.

The sheriff jerked a thumb at the undertaker who was sitting up, holding his head in his hands. "Zachary brought 'em in. Smuggled the hull crew into town right under our noses—in those coffins. Reckon he was aimin' to git 'em out the same way—"

Trimble shook his head. "Wal," he said judiciously. "they'll be fillin' them coffins permanent, now."

There was a commotion in the doorway and a high-pitched voice said: "Outta the way, folks. I got news!"

Heads turned as a wizened, leathery faced man about Windy's size and general shape, pushed into the room. A half dozen voices merged with Windy's and Long Jim's: *"Hardpan!"*

Hardpan looked at the scattered corpses. "Dang it, I knew I'd miss somethin'. Heard the racket as I was comin' into town—"

"We thought you was dead," accused Windy. "How come yo're alive?"

Hardpan chuckled. "Jest a joke Stevens an' I cooked up. Ran into pay dirt up on the mesa. Didn't know just what I had, so we figgered if I played dead a while I'd git time to work the vein, find out just how rich it was, and git it all staked out 'fore I came to town to file on it— Hey!" He shook his head as practically every man in the room stampeded out to look for shovels, picks and other paraphenalia needed to stake out a claim.

He turned to Windy and Long Jim, grinning: "Recognized yuh this afternoon, when you rode up to my shack. That's why I was comin' to town—"

"To celebrate," interrupted Penn Trimble with a grin. The bulky saloon-keeper had not gone charging out after the others, knowing there was no need for him to do so. Whatever gold was found on the mesa would come trickling in across his bar.

"They're on the house tonight, boys," he said generously. "All you kin drink—" he looked accusingly at Hardpan—"of Trimble's likker—"

"Be with yuh in a minnit," said the sheriff, clamping a pair of cuffs on the sullen undertaker. He waited until they had gone before drawing from his pocket a small, sample bottle of Tigro.

He sat on the edge of a coffin and took a long swallow. Then he waited for the kickback. After a while a surprised look came into his face. "Damned if it don't taste jest like Trimble's likker."

THE END

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25¢ BIG-BOOK WESTERN

By GIFF CHESHIRE

Next on the list to die was Tobe Ripley, and nobody in that whole intimidated town was foolhardy enough to help him. Nobody, that is, except the amiable, shiftless old piano tuner. . . .

His entrance to the saloon had a decided effect.

DEATH'S TUNESMITH

THE INSTANT he entered Tobe's Tavern, in this Yellow Bluff town, Tunin' Tedro caught the heady smell of trouble. A wide, brawny man of middle years, the piano tuner paused in genial inspection, his scuffed cowhide valise and the greasy old grip which held his work tools balancing him. He dropped these before the desk and watched the quarrel.

His entrance momentarily stopped it, though tight anger clinched the desk clerk's gaze on the pair before him. These two flicked guarded glances toward Tedro, and yielded him no room before the desk. Tedro could feel tension—at which he could only guess—ready to spill, yet held back. The long-shanked, lean-jowled one of the sinister pair said, "We'll see, Ripley," and departed with the blocky, dull-eyed man tramping behind.

Tedro let an amiable grin slide into the corners of his wide-cut mouth. "Dissatis-

faction at your hospitality young sir?"

Ripley snapped politely out of his troubled study. "The dissatisfaction is solely toward Tobe Ripley, sir. For trying to run a self-respecting business in a rotten town."

Tedro accepted the pen and gave his attention to the register, aware that the other was carefully reading his name.

"They just threatened my life, Mr. Tedro," said Ripley, in a voice from which some of the youth had suddenly gone. "You see, a man was shot down in the alley behind the hotel last night. Vines' saloon is next door. The man was going there by way of the alley and he didn't make it. He was shot from behind. That puts the gunman at the back of the hotel. And Vines is blaming me."

"Why?" asked Tedro.

"Maybe to railroad me. He owns the law here. Maybe to rig an excuse for killing me. He doesn't wait long when he's got a move ready."

"He looked mean," agreed Tedro. "The way to beat a fast move is to move faster, boy."

"I'd have to kill half a dozen men to reach him."

"Howcome no help from the town?"

"Scared silly."

Tedro ascended to his room, locating it for himself. He dropped one grip to the floor with a clatter, tossed the other onto the bed. He opened this to fish a clean shirt from it, then washed and dressed freshly. The stage haul through Ten Spot basin had been hot and dusty, and he felt the want of a drink. He recalled Ira Vines' saloon next door and descended to the street.

A commotion across from him brought him up, watching. A man was sprawled on his backside, over there, tins and bags spilled all around him. Bald and crackle-faced, he clawed upright, looking in bland apology at a girl with frosty eyes. Tedro frowned at her attitude yet admired the neat effect of her buckskin skirt and yellow blouse and tumbling russet hair.

"You might look where you're going, Silas Steffens!"

"I'm sorry, Miss Odell! I had my arms so full I couldn't see when I came out of the store. Did I hurt you, Miss Myrla?"

The girl swung aboard a saddler, then slanted a quick smile down at him. "No. And I'm sorry I lost my temper, Silas."

The little man gathered his bundles and came plodding across the street toward Tedro. As he stepped onto the high walk, a tomato can tipped from his burden and dropped into the dust. Tedro bent and picked it up. Silas Steffens smiled as he tried to bow. Tedro stacked the can where it belonged.

"You have a pack of hot-heads in this town, Steffens."

"The young lady's all right, sir. It's not that she doesn't like me. She doesn't like Tobe Ripley, and since I work for him at the hotel—!"

"Say—!" said Tedro, like a long sigh. "You cook there? I remember you, my friend!"

"I'm afraid you have me at a loss, sir."

"No wonder," commented Tedro, the warmth of a sudden pleasant memory in his heavy voice. "It's been a good five years. I remember you, sir, less than your hotcakes. Buttermilk hotcakes. Do you still prepare them?"

"Why, I do, sir!" Pleasure shone from the little cook as from a kicked, then petted pup. "The hotel's changed hands since then, but I'm still there. I guess I'll always be there." Steffens shuffled off a few steps. "I'm pleased that you remember, sir."

Tedro turned down walk and into the Oxbow saloon. Eyes searched him as he paced a bold line to the bar. The edgy pair who had scanned him so closely at the tavern now sprawled at a cardtable, earnestly huddled, raveling talk with a third man but breaking it to look at Tedro.

Tedro fronted up to the bar and ordered whisky while he pictured the way this off-circuit town had felt to him when he had last visited it. He recalled a clean, honest, peaceful little cattle town. Some quality had gone from it; something else had taken its place, something deep and disquieting. Vines had brought it to the town. Yellow Bluff now looked the way Ira Vines looked —evil, lustful, explosive.

He placed Tobe Ripley neatly in the picture, young and zealous and brash. He was sorry for Ripley even while he admired the grain of him. Without town support he would get nowhere, and with Vines set angrily against him he could reap no harvest here but adversity. An admirable man but overwhelmed—it was an old story to Tedro.

The tuner's scowl had cleared the spaces

flanking him. He needed someone to talk to, and a day's stubble gave him his excuse. He flipped a coin onto the bar and retraced his way to the batwings.

"Hear you had a beefing, last night," said Tedro, a little later and from under a hot towel.

The barber slapped his razor on the strop. "We sure did. Somebody drilled Hoke Hyatt where his galluses cross. It's no wonder, except that somebody finally had the crust to do it. A lot of men carry Hyatt scars on 'em hereabouts, mister."

"A Vines handyman?" asked the tuner.

"Ira Vines' right hand. Now it'll be that fish-eyed Pete Undset. Don't know which is worse. And they're spreading foolish talk about Tobe Ripley. You like 'em shaved short, mister?"

Tedro grunted in the affirmative and felt the razor's sharp edge slide down a meaty cheek. "Howcome this Ripley has to make a one-man stand?" he asked at the next pause. "This a plain gutless town?"

"Well, hardly. Nobody believes the talk. More folks're rootin' for Tobe than'll let on. Mebbe when the real pinch comes he'll find help."

"Howcome his girl's mad at him? She want him to bend his neck to Vines?"

The barber laughed a little. "He tromped on her sore toe when he first come here, six months ago. She's got a touchy way. She's had it hard since old Spence died, leaving her the Circle O to run. I hear Tobe told her in front of people at Miller's store that she'd do better sticking to her petticoats. But since then I've noticed a funny thing. Myrla's quit wearing them old boy's clothes of hers and taken to dolling herself up prettier than a picture. She's trying to quit acting hard. I guess that must have been the windup of some quarrel."

"She loves him," agreed Tedro. He came up as the barber straightened the chair, heavy jowls bare and powdered. He paid for the service and returned to the street's sticky, late afternoon heat. The elements of violence were certainly here. The fact of Hoke Hyatt's demise on a spot behind the hotel was meaningless, inasmuch as few murderers insist on working from their own premises. It even could be a deadfall arranged by Ira Vines to prepare an excuse for lethal action against young Ripley. Tedro's feeling lay this way, yet he was not foolish enough to intercede singlehanded.

WHEN Tedro tramped back into the hotel, Ripley grinned absently across the desk. "The card you put in the window hasn't scared up any business for you yet, Mr. Tedro. But I know of one job. The lodge piano's in bad shape. I'm the lodge master and I'll give you the key in the morning.

Tedro slept late the next morning, enjoyed buttermilk pancakes for his breakfast, sloshed down with a quart of coffee. When he called at the hotel desk for the lodge hall key, Tobe Ripley said, "I'll send Si Steffens over with you. He's got his room over there and acts as janitor for the lodge. He can show you the way." The younger man's nerves were jumpy, as they had every right to be.

With the little cook paddling beside him, Tedro moved down the sidewalk and turned onto a drowsy street thickly shaded and perfumed by locusts. He spotted the lodge hall, a dilapidated building of two stories. There had been a store below-stairs, the tuner observed, but the space was now vacant and littered. An outside stairs climbed to the second story. Steffens ascended these, and Tedro lifted himself heavily behind.

The lodge room was a barnlike structure, bare except for the piano and a number of benches. Tedro went to the piano and dropped his kit of tools. "Thanks, Steffens. I'll make out now."

A look of trouble broke the meek passivity of the cook's seamy face. "Mr. Tedro, there is nobody in this town I can talk to, and you seem to be a man of principle. They're building a terrible trap for Tobe Ripley."

This was already the tuner's private opinion, but now he asked, "What makes you think so, Silas?"

The cook's bombshell reply was delivered in the same flat, diffident tone. "I saw Hoke Hyatt killed two nights ago. I saw Pete Undset shoot him without warning."

"No!"

"I wish it wasn't true, sir, but I saw it. My room is in the back of this building, on the alley. It's across from the hotel and Ira Vines' Oxbow saloon. Hyatt was coming down the alley, and Undset stepped out from between the two buildings and shot him in the back. I couldn't see Hyatt but I

did see Pete Undset. I'm not mistaken."

The tuner gave it a moment's hard study. "I hear Undset has become Vines' right hand. Maybe it was just envy. Have you told young Ripley this?"

"Yes, but what can he do? And it wasn't something Undset pulled on his own, sir. He ran down the alley and jumped back into the Oxbow's back door. Vines surely knew about it. He probably wanted to kill two birds with one stone. Hyatt was getting a little too rough, even for Vines. He was getting the town too riled. So they got rid of him and also built a grudge case against Tobe Ripley."

"They couldn't hang Ripley on that flimsy evidence."

"They're too smart to try that. But Tobe Ripley's been pretty outspoken about Vines. He urges the town to revolt. Folks know he's inclined to brood about getting nowhere with it. It's my notion they'll base a feud on it and manage to get him shot in it. You see, he's got too much support for them to try it without some sort of excuse."

The young hotelman's position did seem hopeless to Tedro, and a part of this futile sense sharpened his face. "Well, do you expect me to kill Vines and Undset?"

"Why, no, sir. I just had to talk to somebody. It would do no good for me to make public what I saw. Everybody knows I think a lot of Tobe Ripley. He hardly seems like a boss to me. Only a friend. I haven't had many, Mr. Tedro." The little cook shuffled off.

Tedro finished the piano tuning job, worried, doing his work mechanically. It was noon when he left the lodge hall and returned to the hotel. No one else had put in a request for a piano tuner's services, but Tedro gave this no concern. He tried to tell himself that Ripley had to finish his own quarrels, but this was no good. Tunin' Tedro had a quick warm sympathy for an underdog. He had an affinity for the young idealism the years had put away from him.

The dining room was crowded, at that hour, with Ripley busy by the hotel desk collecting the price of the meals. Tedro cut toward the dining room, waited for a table and ate with an unnatural lack of hunger. When he emerged, Ripley was less busy, and Tedro crossed to him.

"Si told me about it," said Tedro, putting fire to a cigar, the rugged planes of his brown face heavy with concern. "Your only chance is to upset their hand."

Ripley lifted a dryly amused gaze from the long, thin fingers that drummed the counter top. "If you know how, you've got me beat."

"You might as well face it, boy. If you don't kill Ira Vines he'll have you killed."

A bleak exasperation stained Ripley's cheeks. "You can't get to him. Pete Undset's never out of his sight, and they're both fast with a gun. There's usually another watch dog or two handy. Maybe I could kill Ira Vines, all right, if I was ready to commit suicide."

"With help, boy, it might be different."

Ripley looked at him with surprised interest. "If you mean yourself, why should you buy a piece of it?"

The tuner grinned. "For no reason beyond a stubborn streak when it comes to seeing justice. If Vines and Undset operate as a fast gun team, you and I could do likewise. They won't look for it. We could visit them before they remember the possibility of your taking prior action."

"I can't let you do it, Mr. Tedro."

Tedro swore to himself and ascended to his room. He wore two holsters, shortened and looped to an extra long pant's belt so that they rode higher than was usual. He checked these now, then let the skirts of his threadbare coat drop over them. They concealed the guns well because of the heavy folds of his massive body. He went down the stairs and turned out into the street.

IT WAS another hot day, the coppery sun hanging hard above the town at this hour; no air moved, so that a false stillness lay over the squat, rough-fronted buildings. Daytimes, before the riders came off the hot desert in search of pleasure and before the grangers drove in for an evening's buying at the stores, there was little to upset the town's even tenor.

Tedro turned through the doorway of the Oxbow saloon, partly because he habitually postponed the day's first drink until after one o'clock and partly because he wanted to check the lay of the place. A sour-looking bartender regarded him without welcome.

Down room a single individual occupied himself with a game of solitaire, positioned so that his back was toward a wall, his at-

tention free upon the door that probably opened into a back sanctum. Tedro whistled to himself. It was as well guarded as Ripley had claimed.

There was a battered piano in the corner by that wall and behind the guard. Tedro tipped it a nod. "I haven't heard that thing played, my friend," he said to the bartender. "If it needs tuning, I'd like the job."

The man's lips moved tiredly. "You'd have to see Vines about that."

"Where is he?"

"Back room. Only he's busy."

Tedro started that way and drew a warning movement from both the bartender and the guard. He shrugged massive shoulders. He had gained as much as he had expected to—the certainty that killing Ira Vines would be a considerable chore. He departed in a bland shuffle.

Tedro spent an hour in earnest conversation with Tobe Ripley that afternoon, then went to his room to nap, his mind decided and relaxed. Later, at supper, he ate with returned relish, then idled a great while in one of the barrel chairs on the hotel porch, watching the country begin to invade the town.

He tramped at nine o'clock to the Oxbow, sidling amiably to the bar. He stayed there for three drinks, feeling their mellowness spread from his stomach, then without apparent intention he idled toward the big piano.

The instrument was atrociously out of tune, he discovered with the first cord. Yet a little discord would not mar the music for these hard-bitten sons of the frontier; he had seen that over and over again. He played in easy indolence, aware of the wheel that formed three quarters around him.

The guard had been changed, but since one still closely covered the door to the back, Tedro knew that Ira Vines was out there. By tilting his head toward the upper end of the keyboard, Tedro could see the door, and he did it often. Then the first curiosity passed, and men returned to their drinking and cards and conversation. The tuner's music was now a pleasant background, and this gave Tedro more freedom of observation.

Precisely at nine-thirty Tobe Ripley came in, sauntering, making a good show of unconcern. Ripley came the length of the room to the end of the bar, where he paused. His entrance had had a considerable effect on certain watchers, Tedro observed. The Vines henchman at the table along the rear partition shifted with evident lack of ease.

Fifteen minutes before ten Silas Steffens slipped into the big crowded room. Tedro noted this with a frown, for he had no forewarning of it. It was not part of the plan. Steffens crowded inconspicuously into a niche between two big punchers, his back to the room, nursing a beer.

The next time Tedro cast a brief glance toward the important door his eyes widened in surprise and dismay. Silas Steffens sat modestly along the wall, not a yard from the table over which the guard hunched above a spread of cards. The guard appeared not to have noticed him; nobody paid much attention to little Silas Steffens.

Tedro tried to catch Steffens' eye to warn him away. The little cook was going to ruin the thing. From his own position, Tedro meant presently to swing and nail the guard and before the surprise could die to wheel open that door and go throught it, Tobe Ripley behind him. Steffens carried a bottled beer, which he drank timidly.

Tedro was not sure of the next passing seconds. Steffens lifted his slight body with evident tiredness, slouched past the man at the table. Without warning he swung, cracking the beer bottle hard across the man's head. It made no sound greater than the room's steady racket, and probably besides Tedro no more than three or four men noticed this.

It was Silas Steffens who swung open the door and leaped into the back room, clawing a gun from the band of his trousers.

Tedro had no course now but to help the best he could. Besides the guard, he knew there would be several Vines men sprinkled through this outer room. By some miracle there was as yet no alarm. He breasted the door, heeled and ploughed through.

He was in a short hall. A door hung open to his right, yellow lamp light spilling on the splintered hall floor. Tedro drew up his guns, and in the same instant a shot cracked in the room ahead of him.

A man's voice yelped, "Are you crazy, Steffens?" Tedro came into the abruptly blazing room on the balls of his feet. Already Silas Steffens was stretched still on the floor, but Pete Undset, blocky and cold

and vacant-eyed, was sprawled in a circle-backed chair in a corner with his arms stretched uselessly.

Tedro now took the full wrath of Ira Vines' gun. The man was crouched behind his desk, and he fired quickly over it, and the bullet took the big, floppy hat from the tuner's head. The instant's hush beyond the partition broke to a twist of excited shouts. A man yelped, "Stay out of there!" and guns spoke in that direction.

Tedro fired, and his bullet beveled an edge of the desk. He laid a second uncomfortable slug into the space beyond. It drew Ira Vines to his feet, blazing-eyed, desperate. They fired point blank and in the same split second.

The tuner tottered on his feet, seeing Ira Vines come down across the desk with a hard slap of an unprotected face. Blood jetting from his neck guaranteed that he would not lift again. Tedro cast a checking glance toward Pete Undset, but the pallor of death there was unmistakable.

HE BENT over Steffens. Blood pooled around the little man, and he saw the tremor of will in the slight body. The gun that had killed Undset lay on the floor. Steffens managed to lift his head slightly, white lips trembling in difficult speech.

"Tobe was my friend. And you, sir, another—!" There was a rattle and silence.

Gun racket beyond the wall was heavier. Tedro wheeled, paced the short length of the hall. The next door still hung open and he bunched his legs and lunged through.

The saloon had cleared, some spewing to the street, others forting. Tedro had picked his route, and now he sped bent along the wall until he was behind the piano. Its big solidness comforted him, but now he was doing his playing on the wrong side. His probing gaze picked up the shape of the action here.

Tobe Ripley was beyond the bar, at this end, and it had been he who had kept the Vines hirelings from surging back to the gun fight in the rear. The guard had recovered from the whack across his head and crawled behind a tipped table. There were three others ripping the bar's paneled front with angry lead.

Tedro was grinning wolfishly as he bought his chips. His emergence had been discovered, and the old piano drew some of the bar's punishment. Hunkered there, the tuner laid his shots only where they would buy their cost. A racket grew beyond the street wall. He heard the town barber's gravelly voice shout, "We've got to earn our peace in a decent town, boys! Let's go in!" A window went out, a batwing door came jerking off its hinges, and after that it was bedlam.

* * *

The doctor visited Silas Steffens, after they had carried him to Tobe Ripley's own room. The little cook was shot low in the chest, but the wound bled cleanly. The doctor made an examination and was not overly pessimistic.

"Sometimes these little cusses surprise you," he said.

"Doc, you're speaking gospel!" said Tobe.

Tedro, when his shoulder wound had been tended, followed Ripley to the latter's office, where they had a pair of drinks. "Si's earned a promotion, Tobe," said Tedro, deep in thought.

"Mister, he'll be a full partner, if he'll have it that way!"

Tedro grinned, relaxation coming at last. "Tobe, that rash streak of yours is going to get you into trouble again. You'll need more than a partner with more than his share of guts. You'll need something on the toning-down side. A prospect I saw was mighty fetching. Howcome you can't get along with this Myrla Odell?"

Confusion spread under the tan of Ripley's lean cheeks. "Why, she doesn't want to be courted, Mr. Tedro. Somehow, she just doesn't seem to want that kind of thing."

"You mean you can't understand the pretty way she's dressed since you quarreled? You ride out to see her in the morning, son. Pick her a bouquet of wild flowers on your way. Then see whether she's got a real woman's heart in her."

"Why—why, maybe I will."

Tedro tramped up to his room, satisfied now but weary. Tomorrow he would collect from the lodge the two dollar fee for tuning its piano. It would be his only cash yield from this town of Yellow Bluff. Some men might call it a profitless sojourn, but as he stripped himself for bed he felt comfortably compensated.

• • DRY WELLS

Kenton pointed at the man. "That's your killer, Marshal," he said in a steady voice.

CHAPTER ONE

Cut and Run!

CARPETBAG at his side, Dan Kenton stood on the platform's edge waiting as the eastbound slowed for the station. Every cloud of steam whooshing from the engine's exhaust seemed to chant: *"Coward—coward—coward!"*

Madge Eden was saying: "Well, good luck to you, Dan. You'll write, won't you?"

He stared at the cinders, his jaw tight, his eyes unable to look at her much as he wanted another, last glimpse of her fair, blue-eyed loveliness. He thought: If she would only say what's really on her mind! If she would only upbraid me and call me

REBELS

Action Frontier Novelette

By D. B. NEWTON

Dan Kenton was running away from the guns of Shaw's murder combine and leaving the girl and the life he loved behind him .... until the scorn in the eyes of a hired killer told him that there was a time when a dead hero may fight better than a living coward!

a yellow hound—instead of being so nice about it all, as though I were doing nothing wrong by running away!

But now the train was on them, and the earth trembled to the pound of its drive wheels, and in the squeal of the brake shoes words were useless. That, he thought, was good; it made farewells unnecessary. Dan leaned, got his carpetbag. Quickly he touched his hatbrim to Madge and turned away, heading for the door of the first chair car.

He located a seat by the window, stowed his bag in the rack above it, and slumped into the stiff green upholstery. This was just about the worst moment of his life—even worse than when he'd signed the bill of sale for his store, pocketed the cash Luke Shaw's man gave him, and walked away licked and beaten.

You couldn't fight forever, he tried to tell himself; not against the odds Luke Shaw could pile against a man, and the gunslicks Shaw kept on his payroll. Dan Kenton owned a gun too—it was in the carpetbag, resting now on the rack overhead—but he had no talent or will for gunwork. He had kept the weapon around only as a possible protection against burglars at the hardware store. But it had been no protection from Luke Shaw's threats.

Tom Sloan, before him, had tried to fight. Now Luke Shaw owned Tom's grocery and Tom was gone—frozen out, penniless. Dan tried to tell himself he had only used his head by quitting while there was still a chance to save something. That any wise man would do the same—would cut and run from such a hopeless fight. Trouble was, all that kind of reasoning didn't keep him from being a coward. And it didn't change the fact that he was leaving Madge Eden and her father, in the lurch—leaving them, alone, to bear the brunt of Luke Shaw's ruthless ambition.

Shaw had made no open move against the Edens yet, but it would come. Any fool could see that their grain and feed business was the next thing in line—the final instrument the man needed to complete his economic hold over the stockmen and farmers of this Dry Wells country. . . .

The voice of the conductor bawled out: "All aboard!" The engine bell started its clanging.

At the last moment Dan was unable to resist a look through the window at his elbow. Yes, there were the Edens—both of them—still standing back under the shade of the red depot roof, watching the train. He could see from here the scowl on old Jeremy's seamed face. Madge, clinging to her father's arm, was wearing that look of disappointment which was somehow worse than anger.

And then, about to glance quickly away, Dan Kenton saw a thing that made him jerk upright in the seat. A man was lurking in the protection of a shed near the depot. It was Buck Temple, one of Shaw's killers. He had a gun leveled in his hand and his eyes were fixed on the thin shape of old Jeremy Eden. Dan saw he was going to shoot, and that no one on the platform was aware of his presence.

Dan threw himself at the closed window, fumbled to get it up and shout warning. The catches refused to budge. Then, remembering his own gun in the carpetbag in the rack above the seat, he leaped to his feet and reached for it. Passengers in the coach were staring at him as though he were crazy. And at that instant the train gave a lurch that hurled him off balance, threw him heavily against the chair.

He didn't hear the report of the killer's gun; but through the window he caught a glimpse of old Jeremy Eden stumbling as the bullet plowed into him, twisting about as he fell. After that the train was rolling away from the station and the dreadful scene slid past and was lost.

In the grip of horror, Dan Kenton sat there and stared through the window, unseeing, as the train gathered speed and the landscape streaked away in a tawny blur. They had left the town behind now, and the dry range stretched away to distant sandstone rims that cut a ragged edge against the blue sky. The sun hung low on the horizon, and the train sped away from the sunset, toward the safe and distant East, leaving this land of violence behind it.

According to the snatches of idle talk that came to him from the other passengers, Kenton gathered that no one else in the car had noticed what happened back there at the Dry Wells station. Probably he was the only person who had seen Buck Temple lurking to take his shot at Eden. Probably Dan Kenton, who thought he had washed the affairs of this range from his hands

entirely, was the only witness to link Luke Shaw's gunslinger to the grim business.

Perhaps the worst of it was that he had no way of knowing—most likely would never know—whether or not Jeremy had been killed outright by the bullet. Perhaps old Eden would linger for days of agony. Or he might recover. Whatever the sequel might be, Dan Kenton could only go through life, wondering. . . .

The car conductor came along, punching tickets. When he reached Dan he had to speak twice before jarring him to awareness. "Got your ticket, young man?" Dan jerked his head up, looked at the conductor for a long moment without speaking. Then suddenly he was getting to his feet, reaching for the carpetbag upon the rack.

He said: "I reckon I've changed my mind!"

With that he shoved past the puzzled railroad official, went down the length of the car and opened the door to step out into the vestibule. Here the roar of the train, the clacking of wheels over the railends, was punishing to the ears. Dan Kenton moved to the steps, braced himself against the lurch of the train as the scenery blurred past him.

They were coming up a grade now, with a long curve ahead, and slackening speed a little. It was the only chance he would have. Dan Kenton, peering ahead along the side of the swaying coach, picked his spot. He threw the carpetbag out, and then leaped, flinging himself far wide of the pounding wheels.

The earth took him with brutal force, but his body was limp enough to absorb the shock. He rolled then, in a choking cloud of dust and cinders. At the foot of the incline he lay for long moments, breathless, and then staggered to his feet.

By now the train was gone, leaving a plume of black smoke to melt against the sunset colors of the sky. Silence lay across the wide land. Dan Kenton brushed the filth from his clothing. The coat had a long rent in one sleeve. He located his hat and dragged it on, and then limped back to where the carpetbag lay in a clump of sagebrush.

First, he unsnapped the catches and from the clothing and other belongings that filled the bag drew an ugly, longsnouted sixgun. He broke it, looked at the shells in the chamber, snapped the gate and spun the cylinder. He handled the weapon awkwardly, for he was not at all familiar with its use. Finally he stowed it in a pocket of his battered coat and closed the bag again.

His face was grim as he turned his back upon the departed train and started walking, stumbling at first over the uneven ties.

A LEG had been twisted in falling, and walking didn't seem to ease it any. Before long Kenton had developed considerable of a limp that slowed him down and made the tramp back to Dry Wells a painful ordeal. He had to stop and rest frequently. The light died out of the world and black darkness settled in, without a moon, and the twin rails gleaming dimly in starlight made his only guide through the flat, unfriendly land. A stiff breeze off the rim came down with the night, and Dan Kenton shivered against it in his thin suit with the torn coat.

The lights of town began to show ahead of him, finally—the town he had thought he was leaving forever. They seemed to grow no nearer as he trudged on painfully, still clutching the handle of the carpetbag that had grown heavier with every mile. But finally he reached the straggling outskirts of the place, and here he went down the railway embankment, broke through scrub growth and bushes at its foot and climbed again, circling wide to avoid the flickering blaze of a hobo's campfire. He came into Dry Wells obscurely, through byways and the darker streets; for Luke Shaw would not like his returning and he did not want to advertise it—yet.

Very strong was the desire to go straight to the Edens, to see Madge again and find out just what the bushwhack bullet had done to her father. But he quelled this; he had no right to see Madge, not until he had made some move that would prove to her—and to himself—that he had won his battle with the fear that made a coward of him. And Dan Kenton had settled in his mind what that move must be.

The jail was dark, but there were lights in the town marshal's shack next door. After his knock Dan had to wait a long moment, and then Carl Fannen threw the door open and scowled at him. "Kenton?" the marshal grunted, surprise showing as his pale eyes ran over the storekeeper's torn clothing and scratched face. "I thought you

were leaving town for the east today."

"Let me in, Marshal," said Dan, impatiently. "I got important things to see you about!"

Inside the dingy, cluttered room, with the door shut and Fannen facing him across the glow of a table lamp, he came first to the matter that was uppermost in his mind. "What about Jeremy Eden, Marshal? Is he dead?"

"I don't think so, though he was in a bad way the last I knew. You heard about the shooting, did you? A damn shame, it was!"

Dan Kenton hesitated, thinking: There's still time to back out of this—not get in too deep. But he said, with a firmness that surprised himself: "No, I didn't hear about the shooting. I was looking out the train window—and I saw it!"

The officer's pale eyes widened. "You mean—you actually saw the man who pulled the trigger? I've asked plenty questions but couldn't find a single witness!"

"That's sort of what I figured," Kenton told him quietly. "That's why I got off the cars and came back—so I could identify old Jeremy's bushwhacker." He paused, and then ended, "It was Buck Temple, Marshal!"

He saw fear, then, running strong through the lawman's sallow face and flickering behind his eyes. Carl Fannen's mouth opened and shut again several times before he could speak. He managed to stammer: "You—you're sure of this?"

"Certainly!" snapped Kenton in a voice full of anger. "I could see him plainly from my window on the train. He was around the corner of a shed near the station. I saw his face, and I saw the gun in his hand leveling for a shot at Jeremy. And then I saw Jeremy Eden fall."

Fannen cut in quickly: "Did you see the gun go off?"

Dan hesitated. "No," he answered truthfully, "I guess I didn't. I was busy trying to get my own weapon out of my carpetbag."

"Then, you might have been mistaken," Fannen went on hurriedly, eagerly. "Even if it was really Temple you seen—and, after all, it's quite a distance from the train to the shed—still, you can't swear positively that his gun was ever fired. It's just an assumption! Y'understand," he added, hastily, "I'm only trying to keep you from getting into needless trouble. Buck Temple's a dangerous man—"

Dan stared at the marshal, hardly able to believe his ears. Finally he said with utter coldness in his tone, "It may be an assumption, but seems to me it's a pretty damned natural one, when you see one man pointing a hogleg at another with a killer look in his eyes, and a split second later that other gent stops a bullet. Especially when the killer's boss happens to be none other than the victim's enemy!"

"Now wait a minute!" Carl Fannen threw up a hand. He was leaning back against the table for support and the lamplight showed sweat plainly across his forehead. "You're talking sort of rashly, my boy!"

"I'm talking about Luke Shaw!" exclaimed Dan Kenton. "Do you pretend you can't see the connection between him and the shooting of Eden? He ran out the only competing grocer in town; he's taken over my hardware store; now if he can get control of Eden's grain and feed business he'll have the stockmen and farmers of this region under his thumb. He can charge whatever prices he wants, get them in debt to him—and once hooked they'll never be free!"

"Such a statement won't hold water," said Fannen, sternly, "and it's best left unmade! For one thing, it was Nels Huff, not Shaw, that bought your store from you—"

"But Nels Huff belongs to Shaw—I'll stake anything on that!" Kenton added, quietly, "Why don't you admit the truth, Fannen? You're scared stiff to cross Luke Shaw and his killers! I know how it is, because I was scared myself—scared enough to skip town and let him have his way. Moreover, I'm still scared! But I found enough courage in me to come back here and testify to Buck Temple's shooting Jeremy Eden. And I'll swear to it before a jury!" He leaned forward, almost touching the lawman with his finger.

The bluster ran out of Carl Fannen suddenly, and he put up an arm and sleeved the sweat from his glistening forehead. He shrugged, and said resignedly: "Well, if you're sticking to that story, I guess there's nothing I can do to stop you . . . Wait till I get my hat and coat!" With that the Marshal left the room.

CHAPTER TWO

Cold Steel and Flames

CARL FANNEN was easily explained. The man was simply frightened, scared to death of crossing Luke Shaw. Dan understood this, and could feel no contempt for him—only pity. He couldn't help wondering just how well he, himself, was going to stack up in this thing he was heading into. The hand of fear was still on him heavy enough.

The marshal was a small man, only coming a little above Kenton's shoulder as they went side by side through the dark streets, Dan carrying his carpetbag. Fannen wore a sixgun that looked incongruously large jutting out from his skinny middle. Kenton was conscious of the weight of the gun dragging down his own coatpocket. He wondered if it showed—and what he would do if called on all of a sudden to use it.

At the Buckhorn they turned in, Kenton trailing the marshal up the three wide steps and shoving through the swing doors beside him. Inside, they both hauled up and looked around a moment, hunting for Luke Shaw. And then spotted him holding cards in a poker game at one of the tables in the rear of the noisy room. Marshal Fannen tilted a last nervous, hopeful glance at Dan Kenton. "Still sure you want to go ahead with this?" he asked, pleadingly.

Dan had caught sight of Buck Temple lounging against the wall behind his boss. There was such a hint of danger about the very look of the man that a touch of panic ran, unwonted, through the storekeeper's lean frame. But he battled this down, and he only nodded briefly to Fannen's question.

So the marshal hitched his gunbelt higher and, with a look of despair on him, started back there and Kenton sided him.

They had counted on finding Luke Shaw at the Buckhorn for the simple reason that Shaw owned the place—it had been his first establishment in Dry Wells, before he set himself to running the merchants out of business, and he still made it his headquarters. Now, as Kenton and the Marshal came picking their way through the tables and the crowd of drinkers and percentage girls, Luke Shaw happened to glance up in the act of shoving forward a pile of chips and paused that way, a flicker of surprise crossing his eyes as they touched on Dan Kenton.

He left the chips where they lay, and lounged back easily in his chair to greet the newcomers. He said: "Evening, Marshal. You want to see me?"

With so many eyes turned on him, Carl Fannen showed his discomfort. He grinned a little, thought better of it and let the sickly smile slide off his face. "Indirectly," he answered. "We were aiming to have a few words with Mr. Temple, there—"

Buck Temple took his hitched-up foot down from the wall behind him, paused erect with the same, easy-flowing movement. He stood flatfooted behind his boss, waiting, danger in every line of him and in the way his right hand moved down toward thonged holster, fingers splayed a little.

For his part, Luke Shaw showed no change of expression. He was the very picture of confidence and unconcern, as he looked squarely at the marshal and murmured: "Yes?"

Fannen shot a nervous look at Temple, let his glance slide around over the other faces turned toward him in silent expectation. Another guntoter had come drifting over, to listen—the halfbreed, called only "Cherokee," who was silent as a shadow and equally skilled with a sixshooter or a hurled knife.

The marshal suddenly looked as though he had swallowed his tongue. That was why, despite the cold fear that knotted itself inside his own body, Dan Kenton spoke up—determined to push this through to a finish. "I'm asking that Buck Temple be put under arrest for attempted murder!" he announced, and his voice sounded unnecessarily loud in his own ears. "For the shooting of Jeremy Eden at the railroad depot this afternoon!"

"What the hell is this?" bellowed Temple, thunder sweeping into his face as he started forward.

Without rising or even looking at his gunslinger, Luke Shaw simply put up a hand and when Temple came against it he halted, and Shaw took the hand down again. "Easy, Buck," he said, mildly. And to Kenton: "On what kind of evidence do you want to place a wild charge like this?"

"On the evidence of my own eyes," replied Dan, flatly. "I was on the train. I saw Temple and the gun in his hand."

Luke Shaw only smiled a little, a one-sided smirk that lifted the corner of his clipped mustache. He was an immaculate person, was Shaw, but he had a swarthy skin—almost as dark as the halfbreed, Cherokee—that somehow gave him the appearance of being always dirty. He said now. "You better have your eyes examined, mister. I happen to remember that Buck was here with me at my office, at train time. We were talking when the whistle sounded. I remember distinctly." He swung his glance toward Carl Fannen. "I guess that alibis Buck Temple, doesn't it, Marshal?"

Fannen was already nodding, rapidly. "Yeah—yeah! No question of that, I guess. Well, thanks for helping us out on this, Shaw—" He was backing up as he spoke, ready to turn and bolt. Dan Kenton swung on him with hot anger rising in him.

"Damn it, Marshal, are you going to accept that against the testimony of an eye-witness?"

The little man raised his hands, palm upward, and the sweat was on his face as he said pleadingly, "But you *could* have been mistaken—you know you *could* have been! And Mr. Shaw has given Temple a complete alibi. I can't do anything in the face of that!"

Luke Shaw said, swinging his heavy gaze toward Kenton, "That's about the sum of it, mister. And if you don't stop this kind of talk I might get angry. You're the same as hinting I'm a liar!"

The storekeeper stood there facing this man, with his gun-slingers backing him, and futility was a sudden heavy weight inside him. His knotted fists opened slowly, his shoulders in the ruined suitcoat sagged. This thing was bigger than he could buck—this thing where even the law knuckled down before an obvious lie and the guns that gave it force. Dan Kenton turned to look at Marshal Fannen, only to find that the lawman had already faded and left that place, left him alone to face Shaw and his killers. *Fear—fear!* Horrible, what it could do to a man; the depths to which it could drag him. . . .

"You see how it is, mister!" Shaw's smooth voice cut in on these dark thoughts, bringing Kenton's eyes to him again. Behind Shaw, Buck Temple's angry scowl had ironed out to a smirk of satisfaction. The Buckhorn owner, still sprawled at ease in his chair with the cards and piled chips on the green cloth before him, shifted his position a little and shrugged. "You're just holding up our game, now," he added. He shoved a thumb significantly toward the batwings, still moving with Carl Fannen's departure. He said, "You better blow!"

With a sour, defeated look on him, Dan Kenton turned on his heel and strode away from that scene. He heard a snicker behind him.

DAN WENT alone through the town's dark streets, and failure was a bitter thing within him. He had backed down before Luke Shaw's threats, given in to them at the moment when he should have stood firm in his knowledge of the right. He might just as well have stayed on that train, this afternoon, kept his tail between his legs and gone on running; for he had accomplished no good by returning here to Dry Wells.

The image of Madge Eden came to him again, stronger than ever, but he put this away from him. There could be no thought of seeing her, now. He had had his chance to atone for his original wrong of knuckling under to Shaw, selling out his store. If he could have forced the cowardly Marshal Fannen to arrest Buck Temple, he might have driven the first wedge and begun the crumbling of Shaw's power. Since he had failed in that, there was no reason left for him to hold up his head.

And yet, drawn by thought of the girl, he must all this while have let his unguided footsteps take him to her; for suddenly he looked around with a stare to find that he was only a few houses away from the Eden home, and that the dark feed store building was right here beside him. He halted at once, frowning, staring through the trees at the yellow square of a bedroom window where, no doubt, old Jeremy Eden was waging his battle with death. What should he do, he thought, heavily? Did he dare to face Madge, now?

He was standing there like that, grappling with his thoughts, when a sound in the dark passageway to his left made him turn hastily. Someone was running toward him along the side of the store, but moving so softly his flying feet made almost no noise at all in the cinders. Dan Kenton knew a kind of alarm at this, and his eyes fought

the shadows piled in the throat of the alleyway as he tried to get some glimpse of the runner. Then he did; for lamplight from across the street suddenly picked out the tall, lean frame and the coppery, high-cheekboned features of the 'breed, Cherokee. And it glinted faintly on a raised knife blade, as Luke Shaw's killer saw Dan and came plunging straight at him.

Kenton stumbled back, right hand jabbing toward the gun in his coatpocket. He got his fingers on it, but when he tried to jerk it out the gun's sight caught on the fabric of the coat and held, and there was a ripping of cloth but the entangled sixgun would not come free. Then it was too late, for the halfbreed's lunging shape was right top of him, and Dan saw the wild glint of his eyes and the blade's streaking.

Desperately, he swung with the hand that held the carpetbag. It connected and drove Cherokee off his feet. At the same moment the leather handle snapped in Kenton's grasp; his body, braced against the weight of the heavy bag, stumbled backwards and slammed into the corner of a building. And then he heard the thud of a thrown blade into flesh—his own flesh!—and redhot agony skewered his upper arm.

Gasping from pain, he sprawled there against the dark wall. In the first shock of it he was incapable of thinking or moving. He knew vaguely that Cherokee had regained his feet, catlike, and was gone into the night without looking to see whether Kenton was dead or even waiting to regain the knife. This in itself was puzzling.

Finally Dan reached and got hold of the bone handle, and it was slick with his blood. Teeth gritted, he gave it a wrench and dragged it free, threw it from him with a shudder of horror and pain. Questing fingers found the left sleeve of his coat soaked already, and the blood spurting freely from the cut. He was sick almost to nausea, and part of that sickness was uncontrollable, anguished fear.

Then he saw something that dragged him out of that grip of shock.

Lying there, he was staring toward one of the dark windows of the Edens' grain and feed store—and beyond that window there was growing a faint glow of red! He blinked, stared again, was suddenly pushing himself up from the ground and stumbling forward. He knew now what Cherokee had been doing in the darkness around the store, and why he had left in such a hurry.

Dan had the gun free of his pocket now, and he used its barrel to smash out a pane of the window. Reaching inside he thumbed off the catch and then ran the window open. He slung one leg across the sill and hastily climbed through.

The fire had been set in a far corner, where there were stacks of grainbags that would quickly take the blaze and spread it wide. But so far it had only a fair start and quickly Dan Kenton waded in. Ignoring the agony of his hurt shoulder, he seized the heavy bags of grain and hurled them aside, scattering them. Then he snatched up an empty gunnysack and began beating at the flames, working furiously to put them out.

But they were too much for one man to lick. They spread, for all Dan's frantic efforts. Soon almost the whole corner of the room had been taken by the mounting, crackling flames, and Dan was panting and choking on the thick smoke, his hurt arm aching with the labor of beating at the fire.

Then suddenly a rear door was thrown open and someone came rushing into the room. By the ghastly firelight Dan saw it was Ned Watkins, the Edens' helper, an intelligent and quick-thinking young fellow. He had a bucket of water that he hurled into the flames and as they fell back with a steaming sizzle he too grabbed a gunnysack and fell to work side by side with Dan.

Heartened by this aid, Kenton found new strength and matched the other's efforts. And working together they somehow got the last of the fire smashed out and then there was only the smoke, the nauseous, pungent odor of charred wood. The damage, thanks to quick action, had been very light.

CHAPTER THREE

On His Own Ground

ALMOST overcome by the smoke he had been fighting, Dan threw away his gunnysack and staggered blindly for the open door. A small, firm hand was on his arm then and helping him, and he stumbled across the sill and into fresh, clean air that

felt cold upon his blistered face. The hand guided him to an empty packing case and he dropped limply upon it, and then he heard Madge Eden's voice speaking his name, over and over.

He could just see the oval shape of her face, a pale blur in the darkness. Ned Watkins came out to them now. "It would have been a hell of a lot worse except for you, Kenton!" he muttered. "Madge and me didn't notice that fire until almost too late to do anything!"

The girl exclaimed: "How did you happen to be here, Dan? And why aren't you on the train?"

Dan ran a sleeve across his forehead, said wearily: "Do you suppose we could move over to your kitchen before we try to talk, Madge? There's a lot to say, and—I've got a little trouble with this left arm. Maybe you can help me patch it up—"

Madge Eden's face was pale, but her hands were steady as she worked at the knife wound in Dan's arm. The coat and shirt were bloody ruins, that she tore away laying bare the cut Cherokee's thin blade had sliced into the muscle of his shoulder; but the wound itself was clean and needed only washing and an antiseptic and bandages. Her cool, capable fingers worked quickly as this task, though looking at her Dan saw the frown of concern etched into her fair brow, and the lip she bit between small, firm teeth.

Ned Watkins had gone back to check on the damage at the store and Dan and the girl were alone here in the lamplit kitchen. The first thing he asked her when the burn of the antiseptic had subsided enough to allow for speech was: "How's Jeremy? How is your father, Madge?"

"He's bad, Dan!" she told him, in a shaky voice. "You knew he had been shot? In the back, it was. Doc got the bullet out, but he's running a fever tonight and we can't tell what to expect. Another twelve hours will tell, Doc says." She paused. "And now you, Dan! It's your turn to do some explaining! You're supposed to be on the train, headed east—"

He told her everything, without embellishment. And he ended: "I'm not proud of anything I've done. I know you've had reason to be disappointed, and even ashamed of me—"

"Oh, Dan!" she cried. He passed over her interruption with some embarrassment.

"—But at least I've got over being a coward and I'm going to fight this thing through! I don't know how just yet. We learned tonight we can't expect any help from the law.

"Shaw knows that too, and that he can operate with a free hand. That's why he sent Cherokee over here as soon as the marshal and I had left him, to burn out your store and finish the job of getting rid of you. That done, he would have his hold on things complete, and could charge the farmers and stockmen of this range any outrageous prices he cared to."

Madge frowned. "But there's still the railroad. What's to stop these people from shipping in the things they need, if they don't like doing business with Luke Shaw?"

"They haven't the cash," he pointed out. "You know yourself how many your father has been carrying on the books. After the last few dry seasons, these folks are in no position to deal in anything but long term credit—and Shaw would use that fact to bring them and their families under permanent bondage to him for every can of food, every tool or pound of seed they have to have." Dan added bitterly, "I knew all this, when I signed the bill of sale for my hardware store. And yet to save my own hide I took the money and cleared out, and brought Luke Shaw one step closer to his goal."

He came to his feet, with those dark words, and then Madge Eden was facing him. "Don't reproach yourself, Dan Kenton!" she pleaded. "You're no gunfighter. I—I wouldn't want you to be one! And it's suicide to stand alone against Luke Shaw's forces."

"Your father proves that!" he grunted, and shrugged heavily. "But I won't be running again—though just what I will do now is still pretty hard to say."

She looked at the sag of his shoulders, the haggard look in his blistered face. "You're tired, and you've lost blood. We'll put you up here for the night, Dan. By morning we'll all be able to think more clearly, to decide how this fight is to be waged."

But he shook his head. "I couldn't sleep, now. And it's a long time until morning. Perhaps we'll have no more trouble from Luke Shaw tonight—probably not. But I can't sit and wait for him to strike again. . ."

MADGE was gone upstairs now to look at her father. Ned Watkins had found Dan's battered carpetbag and brought it in, and Kenton opened it, dug out a clean shirt and a leather jacket. He put these on, and shoved the gun behind his waistband. Then, digging deeper into the bag, he came out with a cracked leather wallet stuffed with bills. He weighed this on the flat of a palm, eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

Suddenly he shoved the wallet into a hip pocket and reached for his hat, hanging on the back of a chair.

Watkins said: "What's on your mind, Kenton?"

Hand already on the knob, Dan hesitated only long enough to answer over his shoulder: "I dunno. Maybe nothing. Or maybe a lot!"

The town was quiet tonight, the streets empty as he moved through them. The moon had risen—a swollen, orange harvest moon, that put its pale light over building fronts and over the flatlands and the sandstone rim beyond. It etched shadows sharp and black. Dan Kenton kept to these shadows and went quickly toward the hardware store that had once belonged to him.

It was dark, but pulled shades over lighted windows in the living quarters at the back told him Nels Huff, the new owner, was in the building. Dan considered for a long moment, and then he went up the two broad steps to the front door and knocked. There was no answer. He could see through the glass the pencil line of light under the interior door in the far wall. After a moment's wait he rapped again, sharply. Then that other door swung open and the stoop-shouldered figure of Nels Huff came, bringing the lamp with him.

He set it on the end of the counter, where it pale light picked out the gleam of plowshares against the wall, of nails in open bins, of harness chains and horseshoes and sickles. Heavy face scowling, he turned the key in the lock and swung the door open a foot or so. His look turned to astonishment at sight of Kenton, and then Dan put his shoulder against the door and pushed it open, and moved into the room. He caught the edge of the door with a heel and kicked it shut. "Surprised to see me again, Nels?" he demanded.

"I—thought you'd left town!" Nels stammered.

"Or maybe that Shaw's halfbreed killer had shoved a knife in me for good?" suggested Kenton. "Had you heard that?" He shrugged then, and without further preamble reached into his pocket and dragged out the cracked leather wallet. He pulled the money from this, riffled through it and tossed the pile of bills on to the counter. He said: "I've changed my mind. I've decided I don't want to sell.""

The other's tawny eyes narrowed quickly. "You can't do that, Kenton. We made a deal—fair and square, and in writing."

"Every cent of your money is on the counter. Take it back and hand over that bill of sale I signed—and no argument!" Then as the other hesitated: "Or have you already turned the paper over to Luke Shaw?"

"There's nothing between me and Shaw!" exclaimed Nels Huff. Dan cut him off with a gesture.

"Have it your way," he grunted. "But I'll have that bill of sale, if you don't mind!" And the lamplight glinted on the polished barrel of the gun in his hand.

Something like cunning replaced the sudden fear that leaped into the man's eyes. Nels Huff shrugged, reaching for the lamp. "It's in the safe in the back room," he said. "I'll fetch it. . ."

He turned away, but Kenton was right behind him. "I'll go along—just in case you try a trick!" All at once he was quite sure a trick of some sort was just what the hump-shouldered man had in mind. Next moment his gunbarrel was arcing downward across Huff's shoulder, smashing the lamp and plunging the room into darkness. At the same moment a gun spoke from the door of the back room, its bullet cutting the air only inches from Dan's head. He whirled, made a dive for the counter, and hitting it flat on his belly went across and in a hard sprawl to the floor on the other side.

Landing, he struck his sore arm and thought he was going to blank out. But he didn't, and crouching there in darkness the butt of the gun dug into his clamped fingers and sudden cold sweat stood out upon his body, put there by the near miss of that whinning bullet. Fear! It was an agony hardly to be endured.

Another gun roared, another slug stamped harmlessly into the solid thickness of the counter. Luke Shaw's voice bellowed

across the room-trapped echoes: "Cherokee! Get over there by the front door and cut him off! He's cornered and we'll shoot him down for a common thief."

Shaw and Cherokee, both in on this! And it was Buck Temple Dan had glimpsed beyond the door of the back room, just in time to smash out the light and prevent that ambush shot from finishing him. So, with Nels Huff, that made four of them against him; and there seemed little doubt they could go ahead and get rid of him at their own good time. The law would say nothing—not when Huff told the marshal about Dan's breaking into his store, holding him up at gun's point. Most likely, no outsider would interfere in this at all. It was going Luke Shaw's way, exactly.

What had Shaw and his two killers been up to, closeted with Nels Huff in that back room? Discussing the setting of the fire at Eden's, no doubt, and laying plans for their next move. . .

Buck Temple growled: "Got another lamp handy, Nels?"

"I don't know where it would be," answered the voice of the storekeeper, out of the blackness. "I don't know my way around here yet."

Luke Shaw cut in on him: "We don't want a light! We'd just target ourselves—"

At that moment someone must have thought he had caught a glimpse or heard a sound from Kenton, for a gun roared again and again, lead plugged into the heavy face of the counter.

Sudden confidence began to build in Dan, as he realized that their bullets could not reach him through that shield. With the knowledge he found that his panicky fear was losing its hold on his throat, that he could begin to think clearly again. He shifted the gun to his free hand long enough to wipe the clammy sweat from his right palm against the rough material of his trousers. Then he shifted the weapon again, gripping it tightly ,and straightened slowly to bring his eyes slightly above the level of the counter top.

Pale moonlight through the windows laid bright squares upon the floor, making the darkness blacker yet. The smell of cordite was sharp and strong in the close air. Dan Kenton heard the scrape of bootleather a few feet to his left and his head jerked that way quickly.

Though he could see no better than his enemies in this darkness, he had one advantage. He was on familiar ground. He had stood so many hours and days right here behind this counter that he could have remembered the exact layout of the store with his eyes closed. He knew just where the nail bins were, where the rakes stood in their rack against the wall. Just to his left, there, the big potbellied stove should be; and that scrape of leather told him that one of his enemies was crouched behind its shelter.

To test this, Dan drew a bead in that direction and when he thought he must have it right, squeezed the trigger. Mingled with the shot as the gun bucked and the dark room brightened luridly to the flash there came the spang and screech as his bullet hit the stove and bounced away, and he heard Luke Shaw's startled bellow.

AT THE same moment Dan Kenton ducked for cover as another gun lashed fire, aiming at the flash of his own weapon.

This one was over near the front door; Cherokee had gone over there to close off that exit, following the order from his boss, and had done it so silently Dan heard no sound he made.

But a grim smile tightened Kenton's mouth, he knew suddenly just where Cherokee was. The breed would be over behind the harness rack, his lean body squeezed into the niche between it and the wall, hugging its shelter. He couldn't know what Dan Kenton knew, having built that rack with his own hands: that the board was paper-thin stuff, incapable of stopping a bullet!

Dan eased up, laid his gunbarrel across the counter, and then hesitated. It hardly seemed like fighting fair—But he thought of Cherokee putting the torch to the Eden's store, and that took any irresolution out of him. He made his aim in the darkness, and triggered three times deliberately.

His lead smashed through the flimsy wood and it dragged a scream from the half-breed. It also brought shots from two other guns, but Dan had moved aside in time. As Cherokee's lifeless body struck the wall and dropped, he swiveled his weapon and triggered at one of the flashes that, he judged, marked Buck Temple's place over somewhere behind the nail kegs. He missed

that shot, and took another dive into cover.

The roar of the guns thinned out. In the silence the voice of Nels Huff sounded—a hoarse whisper: "Five shots, Luke!"

They were counting his bullets! As soon as that sixth one was gone the whole bunch of them would rush in.

A sudden calm fell upon Dan Kenton. He might lose his hide in this setup, but it looked all at once as though he had a chance to end the menace of Luke Shaw before he was through! Deliberately, he broke open the loading gate of his sixgun, jacked out the five spent shells, leaving the good one in place under the firing pin. And then, reaching in the dark, he found the shelf behind him and took down, unerringly, a brand new box of .45 shells. He made as little sound as possible tearing it open, feeding the metal cartridges into his gun, and clicking the gate shut again.

Very deliberately, he took aim into the piled shadows where he judged Buck Temple to be crouched, and he put his bullet across. There was no answering shot; there was a split second of silence, and then Luke Shaw's triumphant shout: "That does it, Buck! Let's get him!"

Shaw was on his feet and charging around the stove as he yelled that; the words turned to a scream as lead took him squarely in the chest. The bullet knocked him sidewards against the cold firebox, hard. Then Buck Temple squeezed trigger and his aim was good. Pain blossomed inside Dan Kenton and only the shelves behind him kept him from falling. But he pressed his shoulders against these, he emptied his gun at Buck Temple.

The shots, one after the other, lit the room in a series of sharp pictures. One showed Buck in midstride, unable to halt the charge he had started toward this man whose gun he thought was empty. At the second he was a long step nearer, mouth open in a shout, eyes glittering in the flash. Then he was jerked up, head back, knees sagging as a slug took him. Then he was falling. The last shot, jerked off by a nervous tug of Dan's finger, showed him in a heap on the splintered floor.

Weakness ran through Dan Kenton after that and he went forward, struck the counter's edge and slid down behind it. Vaguely he heard the door jerked open, booted feet pounding in from the street. Somebody was yelling: "For God's sake, get a light in here!" It sounded like Ned Watkins. . .

He was in a bed, with a lamp glowing on a table and two people standing over him, Ned and Madge Eden. The girl had a look of concern in her eyes. Ned was saying: "Doc will be here in a few minutes, Madge. Nothing to worry about—all he'll have to do is dig a bullet out of Dan's shoulder. It's nothing serious! And your Dad's fever has gone down, and everybody's going to be all right now!"

"I know," she agreed, and tried to smile. "But I—I can't help—" She started to cry, all of a sudden.

Ned Watkins said, "What a fight! I started running when I heard the guns, but it was over before I could reach the other side of town. The town marshal and a bunch of others were standing around outside the store, too scared to go in, but I knew Dan must be in on that shooting and I was the first one through the door. Never smelled so much burnt powder in my life!"

"Is Luke Shaw dead?" Kenton asked him.

"Sure is—and Temple and that halfbreed, too. And Nels Huff was back in a corner and scared out of his wits, babbling about Jeremy Eden's shooting not being any of his idea, and about how he didn't want any more to do with Shaw's dirty work. He was giving Marshal Fannen an earful when I left, carrying you—" A knock on the front door, downstairs, interrupted him. "That'll be the Doc," he guessed, and went out of the room.

Dan Kenton turned his eyes to the girl, her face so close to his. "I guess we don't have to be afraid of Luke Shaw any longer," he murmured, and he felt suddenly very tired and very good. "Neither the honest merchants here in town, nor the farmers and stockgrowers out on the dry flats."

"You're wonderful, Dan," she whispered, and kissed him.

As Ned and the Doc came climbing up the stairs, Dan was thinking: It's best of all when a man knows he's licked his own weakness—and that, afraid or not, he's never going to cut and run from anything again!

THE END

There was a flash of light from the rear of the courthouse, and a rear door opened suddenly.

By SEBASTIAN BRAND

Boothill's Watchdog

They told old Hunk Adams that he was too stove-up and spavined for anything but wrangling horses. He told himself he was a jackass for giving up all chance of saving his hillpocket layout to play gunsmoke angel to that blue-eyed, rattle-brained daughter of the man who'd just fired him!

HE WAS a rangy old sin-twister, fleabitten and stove-in from soda to hock. He was sitting on the top pole of the horse corral, rolling himself a smoke as he waited. He looked upset, worried.

He heard the ranch house screen door slam back on its hinges and he looked up quickly, got down off the corral. As he lit his cigarette you saw the gnarled old hand tremble. He waited nervously, watching this man come off the screen porch, away

from the ranchhouse towards the horse corral. It was John Pry, the 76 boss, and he was lost in thought. Any gent about to take a big and ornery trail herd over rough and ornery country had a good deal to think about, and he almost walked right into the rangy old cowpoke before he was aware of him.

"Oh, yes—it's you, Hunk." He hesitated. "'Morning."

"You wanted to see me, John?" Hunk Addams, cigarette stuck under his handlebar mustaches, moved nervously on his very bowed bowlegs and waited.

All the other 76 riders had finished breakfast some time ago and were now out with the herd. The yard was empty, except for these two.

"Why, yes Hunk. I do want to talk to you. I—I got to tell you something."

"Then spit it out. We got a long ride today."

Just then there was a quick run of hooves on the hardpan north of the ranch house. The pair turned and stared. With a shout of laughter a yellow-haired girl on a big black stallion exploded around the end of the house. She waved at the two cowmen.

"Hey, Nancy. Hold it up!" John Pry shouted to her. "We're hitting the trail pronto. I got something important I want to say to you before we go."

The girl was grinning as she jerked to a stand in front of her dad. The thing you noted about her were her big blue eyes; they had a trusting look, the kind babies wear before they wise up.

"You listen sharp now, Nancy. We'll be back soon, right after the Fourth of July, probably. But get this: don't go fooling around with that tinhorn gambler, y'hear?"

At that moment there was another flurry of hoofbeats. And a big-shouldered kid with a fine, white-toothed smile burst into sight. "Come on, Nance," he cried to the girl. "Two bits I beat you out to the herd!"

The girl waved back. "You're out two bits, bub!" She wheeled before her dad. "So long, Pop," she grinned, "and don't worry about your little daughter. She can handle her weight in wildcats." Then she was tearing out across the plain after the big-shouldered kid, the pair of them howling like juiced-up Comanches as they went.

John Pry watched them grow smaller and shook his head. "I wish to God she could take care of herself, dang if I don't. But she's a helpless girl of seventeen, and mebbeso is half in love with that yonder kid, to boot. That don't bother the tinhorn though, that quick-triggered polecat. I wish she'd forget him; he's too slick a hand with wimmen. Mebbe she'll get over it. . . ."

"You wanted to say something to me, John?" the anxious old gent's voice broke into his thoughts.

The 76 boss started. "Oh, yes, Hunk, I do want to say something. I don't rightly know how to start. We known each other some years now, ain't we?" He stared in thorough appraisal of this old cowhand. He wanted to say his piece without hurting the old boy's feelings, and further he did not want to rile him up. When angry, Hunk Addams was hard to manage. He angered very easily.

"We known each other for some years now, Hunk, and I feel I got a right to talk plain with you, eh?"

"Spit it out, John."

John Pry pulled his cover far down over his eyes, looked squarely between Hunk Addams' eyes and said, "You won't be going on the drive with us, Hunk—you see, I—I need somebody I can trust around the ranch—then there's Nancy, God only knows she needs looking after, and—"

"What are you trying to say, John? You mean I'm getting too old to handle a full-time job? That it?"

The 76 boss said nothing and stared at the ground.

"You know that somebody has to be around to keep an eye on Nancy. She don't know a stacked deck when she sees one. That fancy tinhorn in town has been making passes at her and Nancy's just a little too thrilled over it. She might get herself into big trouble."

"Maybe so. Howsomever that ain't the main reason you ain't letting me come along, is it?"

THERE was an uncomfortable silence. By and by the younger man looked up. "No, it ain't. I'll tell you straight. You're over seventy now, maybe past seventy-five for all I know. I need a more active man with me on this drive, that's all."

The flea-bitten old gent looked away this time, at the far line of hills, slate blue in the morning sun. His eyes were wet and he

tried to hide it. He could not speak. Then, suddenly, the color returned to his face, his eyes sparkled angrily, his gnarled hands began to hop about. He was fighting mad.

"Dammit all, man! I can do as good a day's work as any of them young squirts out working that herd right now. Damn if I can't!"

"Sorry, Hunk. But that's how things stand."

"Too old to work, eh? That what you mean? Well, by cricky, I'm as fit as you right now. I can get a job punching cows anywheres in this valley. I quit!"

"Now gentle down, Hunk. Don't get sore."

The old boy's eyes were blazing and his hands began to tremble. Suddenly he lost control of them completely and sprang forward, swinging. He slammed a terrific left jab up onto the other's chin-point.

"Bah! Me old? That's hogwash!" He moved away from the unconscious form of his boss, swung stiffly up onto his little cowpony without a backward glance. As he loped out of the yard he muttered, "I'll show him he's wrong. I'll get me a berth with another outfit, the Tin Cup maybe, or the Circle C."

The following day, late afternoon, it was a sad and discouraged old cowpoke that dropped anchor in front of Mackesby's livery barn. He had tried all six of the outfits in the valley; they were all friendly, understanding, sympathetic, but the best they would offer him was horse wrangling. Mackesby himself came out front and wanted to know what the trouble was and Hunk told him.

"Imagine," he snorted, "*me*, a horse wrangler! Why, cripes, man, I been a top hand for years and years."

Mackesby wanted to say that perhaps it was just that which was causing the trouble, but he liked this rangy old sin-twister and did not want to hurt his feelings. "Why in the world did you hit John Pry? You could still be working out there?"

"He insulted me, by God, that's why—I been grossly insulted by that hombre. He told me I warn't of no use no more."

Mackesby wanted to smile but he bit into the long Mexican cheroot he was smoking and held it back. "This thing that's worrying me now," Hunk told him, "is that I cain't get work nowheres around here—I'd ruther die than wrangle horseflesh—and I got to meet the notes due on my little hillpocket layout over on Skeleton Creek. I reckon I'll head out of the basin and get work somewheres else. If I can get somewheres where nobody will know me, I'll even wrangle horses, for I can't lose that little hillpocket layout. That'd nigh kill me."

Mackesby exhaled smoke and nodded sympathetically. "Good idea, Hunk. The thing to do is leave." He understood the old jasper whose pride was too great to let his friends see him doing the lowly work of horse wrangling.

"It's too bad you can't get a loan somewhere. How about down at the bank, or how about Pry?"

Hunk said, "To hell with asking Pry for anything. And the bank don't figure I'm a good credit risk, and I ain't got collateral."

"You got to work, then, Hunk."

Hunk snorted. "And pronto, brother, pronto." At that moment he threw a calloused hand up to shade his eyes. "Say, ain't that Nancy Jane Pry's black stallion down the road a piece?"

Both men stared down the street at the horse backing and shifting in front of the Silver Dollar. "Yep, and there's Nancy, too—round front of the horse behind that tree. Say, you don't suppose she's waiting for that lowdown tinhorn?"

"I seen her talking to him there, yesterday afternoon. He's such a no-good skunk it would bust her pa's heart if she got tangled up with him. She's engaged to that big-shouldered Webely kid out at the 76, ain't she?"

"Shorely, only she likes being thrilled by the tinhorn. She don't know nothing, a-tall! There's the no-account, cold-decking critter now, coming out smiling at her. Why, damn him!" Hunk's eyes blazed angrily.

"Hey, you sin-twisting old hellion! come back here. You'll get hurt, messing with that tinhorn!" But Mackesby's warning was lost on the old gent who was striding along on his stiff old bowlegs, his mustaches bouncing, his eyes on the tinhorn.

TINHORN STYLES FRANCE, in a frock coat and clean white shirt, was leaning forward and speaking softly and earnestly to the yellow-haired rancher's daughter. And she was leaning back against the tree, listening happily, glowing like a

branding iron. Somehow, to the approaching Hunk, the girl looked half afraid, half thrilled, totally bewitched. "All right. All right, Styles, I'll think it over," she was saying. There were a lot of people on the sidewalk and neither Nancy nor France were aware of Hunk until he spoke. "You'll think what over, Nancy?"

Nancy jumped. The big game-dealer stiffened slightly, then scowled. There was an ugly suspicion in Hunk's mind as he stood sizing up the pair.

"I hope I ain't suspecting the truth, Nancy," he said slowly. "For it'd shorely break your daddy's heart. Anyhow, you skeedaddle home now, pronto."

The girl finally managed a smile. "Oh, Hunk! I knew you wouldn't let me down. You'll be over to the courthouse tomorrow to help with the Fourth of July fixings?" She was blushing furiously and looking narrowly at Hunk, to find out how much he had overheard.

Though she was just trying to change the subject, it was true that he had promised Nancy his help in building a few pieces of scenery for their tableaux for the Fourth. It was going to be a big day. During the day there would be racing, roping, bulldogging contests; that night, there would be an oration by a circuit judge, then Nancy and her women friends were putting on two patriotic tableaux, one showing the Signing of the Declation of Independence, the other showing the American soldiers bleeding at Valley Forge. These would wind up the day of celebration. Hunk, however, never liked working with women. He had put the thing from his mind soon after making the promise to help.

Now the picture had changed completely. He wanted to stay as near to Nancy as possible, till her dad got home. He realized this meant not being able to leave the valley to find work. He realized he would lose his little hillpocket layout. It was a tough decision, and he was sweating the big drop when he made it. Could he let this girl run off with the tinhorn, ruin her life, maybe her pa's too?

He took a deep breath and said slowly:

"I'll be over to the courthouse tomorrow morning, you can count on that. But right now you rattle them pretty hocks of yourn for home."

But her big blue eyes were fretful, like a baby's. "You know, after the way you busted dad on the chin yesterday you have no right to talk to me, let alone order me around."

"Listen, girl, I been a friend of yourn for some years. I know what's pizen and what ain't—you don't. Now beat it home." Hunk was getting angry.

"You leave me alone, Hunk Addams."

"You heard the lady," the gambler's voice was soft, like his long white fingers; but it carried a warning too.

Insolently, Hunk looked the tinhorn over, then rasped, "You're just a two-bit, small-time, no-account card sharper. Furthermore, you're a polecat for shagging after this here innocent youngster, especially when you know her pa ain't around to ride herd on her."

The tinhorn sneered, "Back in your coffin, corpse."

It was much too much for the old gent to swallow. His eyes smouldered, his clenched fists trembled, and he went sailing in at the man with his old arms wildly flailing. Then quite suddenly, he felt himself being lifted bodily upwards, over—splash! and he knew the gambler had tossed him into the big horse trough fronting the Silver Dollar. When he struggled to his feet, wiped the water and slime from his eyes, he saw Nancy and the gambler cantering off down the street, while the passers-by roared with laughter.

Mackesby took one look, then got a grip on himself as the old gent slogged into his livery barn a short time later. "Well, Hunk, you're dang lucky you're full of water instead of lead," he said with a suppressed grin.

"Lay off the hogwash and give me a dry outfit, brother," said Hunk sourly. "I got to hightail it after that girl. Once I find her I'm going to stick to her till her pappy gets home."

The other wanted to know the reason. "I thought you was so danged anxious to save your hillpocket layout?"

Hunk was genuinely sad. "I guess I got to lose her, though I shorely hate to. But this girl is letting herself be talked into an elopement, the idjut! What kin I do?"

Mackesby shook his head and swore. "That tinhorn?"

"Yep. But I don't know when they plan to skeedaddle. I'm going to find it out, then

break it up. She'll hate me now, but thank me later when it's all over."

The ancient cowpoke fell silent for a long time, his wrinkled face screwed up into a mournful knot. The livery owner looked at him and realized the old gent was worried sick about having to lose his hillpocket layout. He felt enormously sorry for him. He was doing a damn nice thing, Hunk was, sacrificing his one happiness—his home—just in order to save rattle-headed Nancy Pry from deep trouble. It was a fine thing, but a shame he had to do it.

"Listen, Hunk old timer, ain't there something I can do to help? I'm stony broke, I haven't a dollar ready cash, but sure as hell I'd like to help you."

"No. There ain't a thing you can do, that's the hell of it." He forced a grin. "What if I do lose the place? There are others, ain't they?"

"Quit lying, Hunk—" Mackesby straightened up as a voice out front cried: "Oh, Hunk. Hunk Addams!"

MACKESBY said sourly, "There's your yellow-haired bunch of trouble right now, Hunk. Go dab your rope on her. If I was you I'd slap her ears back and hogtie her good, until her pa come home from the drive."

Hunk shook his head as he got to his feet. "Then have her slip the rope some night and slip off into the dark and matrimony with the tinhorn? No, Mack, I'll just string alone with them, like I don't suspect anything. I'm pretty sure they'll try to elope while her pa is still away on the drive, within ten days, anyhow. Say, by jingo, I've got it! I bet they plan to skeedaddle the night of the big Fourth of July shindig, right after them tableaux scenes. Everybody'll be in the courthouse, nobody'll be around to see them go. Damn! That's it, Mackesby."

Mackesby nodded gravely over the tip of his cheroot. "You probably guessed the time, Hunk. They'll slip over to Sage Junction, get hitched and train out. But how the Sam-hill would you bust up a thing like that?"

Hunk smiled craftily, his old eyes sparkled. "I got idears—and I hope for one thing. I hope the tinhorn tries some rough stuff. I ain't entirely unacquainted with Mr. S. A. Colt's .45 calibred argufier."

"No, you ain't, Hunk. But neither is the tinhorn. You better go out front and take Nancy home now—"

"Oh, Hunk, coming or ain't you?" came the girl's voice.

"So long, Hunk. For cat's sake be careful!"

"HEY, Nancy, get a look at this. Ain't this just like Valley Forge in snowtime?" It was next morning, in the courthouse, and Hunk was pointing out to Nancy Pry the results of elbow-grease, hammer and nails, canvas and paint: a snow scene of Valley Forge, 1777-1778, all snow and bleak trees, the red paint in the foreground representing the bloody footprints of the ragged wintering revolutionaries. "Ain't that a hummer? You dames will have to act plenty, to live up to your background scenery."

Nancy nodded, said nothing. She looked uneasy and kept staring out of the courthouse window, down towards the Silver Dollar. Hunk swore as he thought of the tinhorn. "Let's knock off for a while, Nancy. I'm going round back and have a smoke."

Nancy said nothing, just nodded absently. Ten minutes later Hunk slipped back inside when he heard voices. He saw Nancy and the tinhorn talking in low voices. He could not hear what they were saying. "Dammit, I got to sneak up on 'em. I got to hear their plans somehow."

But it was not until nine days later, the night before the big Fourth of July show, that Hunk found himself in a position where he could eavesdrop. He was behind the big canvas Valley Forge scene. It was not too safe a place at that. Once he thought the handsome game dealer was aware of his presence. But he gave no sign, so Hunk concluded that his presence was not known by Styles France.

Nancy Pry had been looking nervous and very much worried. "Oh, what will dad think?" she kept saying. "He'll think it a terrible thing to do to him."

"Don't worry, lovely. It'll all be over tomorrow night," the tinhorn spoke with suave assurance. Hunk was hiding behind the canvas and sweating more than ever when he heard this. "Now, here's the deal. You leave your two suitcases over in my room at the Silver Dollar. I'll go over to

the train station alone. After the show, Jake Collins in the rig will have your suitcases and will pick you up, out back of the courthouse. There won't be anybody around to see you. He'll drive you over to the station."

Hunk held himself back. He was furious, but he also was in luck. He had been put to much skulking and spying to hear this. He was not going to spoil it all. Here was his chance to nip the thing in the bud. He decided he would lay for Jake Collins, grab the rig, then rush Nancy back home and stand guard over her. Her dad was due back the next day or so.

THAT night he slept but little. In his bunk at the 76 ranch he rolled and tossed and cursed himself for a sentimental old fool.

That morning he rolled out of his bunk with the morning star. He got out his old six-shooter, oiled it, checked each shell carefully as he reloaded it. He was restless, fidgety, and after breakfast he and Nancy rode into town. All the way into town he felt Nancy looking at him from the corners of her eyes.

Hunk watched her. She did not look like a happy bride-to-be. "You're worrying considerable about something. Nancy, them tableaux, I reckon. Don't worry. It'll all be over by tonight. Tomorrow's another day."

The girl shook her head and look confused, bewildered, like a wild bronc when he is first corraled. "Here's the town. Look over there, the horse races have started. Let's go watch. I want you to stay with me, Hunk, till tonight anyhow."

Old Hunk stayed with her, all right. A lot closer than she ever realized. Later in the day, when they were riding the stools in Pop's Lunch, Hunk looked out of the window and saw the tinhorn coming out of the Silver Dollar. He looked in through the window, saw Nancy, smiled and tipped his black Stetson and went off down the street, still smiling.

"Hogwash," Hunk croaked. To himself he said, "That cold-decking sharper won't be so danged pleased with himself late tonight."

That night, in the courthouse, when the judge had taken his third glass of water and prepared to wind up his fiery oration, Hunk stretched in his seat, then looked around. There in the shadowy corner of the room stood Styles France. He was getting ready to leave. He saw Hunk looking at him. He leered at Hunk, gave him a big knowing wink. Hunk made an angry face and got up from his seat. Outside he found the tinhorn had disappeared.

"On his way to Sage Junction, by jingo. Well, I better get round back of the courthouse here and get set to grab Jake Collins and the rig. The time has come."

It was very dark back of the courthouse. He could not see anything, he heard nothing. Inside the courthouse there was the noise of clapping. The circuit judge had finished his oration. The women's tableaux would not take more than half an hour, then Nancy would come slipping out—

Hunk tensed. He heard the clippety-clop of hooves. The grinding of wheels in the dirt alongside the courthouse. He slipped behind a big cottonwood. Just then he heard another movement, behind him this time. As he started to spin around, something that felt very like the cold snout of a sixgun rammed itself hard into the small of his back. A voice rasped out.

"Make one more move, old man, and you'll have a hole in your back big enough for that rig to drive through."

Hunk stiffened and his stomach went hollow—sick. Tricked, by crickey! and his hands clenched spasmodically as he stared through the dark and saw a rig. It was *the* rig, for hardcase Jake Collins was handling the lines and it looked as if he had Nancy Pry's two suitcases with him. Hunk realized now that the tinhorn had been wise to him all along. He had been laughing at him. Hunk wished then that he were dead when the great anguish swept his rangy, stove-in old frame. The voice behind him hissed.

"It's all right, Jake. I got the old buzzard. It was even easier than Styles said. Why, this old goat ain't tough, he just thinks he is."

An ugly chuckle came from the rig.

Hunk growled and squirmed. "Oh, I ain't tough, eh?"

"Shut your bristled mug." The man whacked Hunk hard across the back of his head. "No more palaver from you, y'hear? You nosy old goat. Thought you'd bust a perfectly respectable elopement all to flinders, eh? Sneaking around inside the court-

house there, listening to the private talk of decent folk. Figured yourself to be a pretty smart jake, didn't you?"

Hunk gurgled angrily and the hardcase smote him violently from beyond. "I'll fix you so you can't make any noise at all, by God!" Without warning, a bandanna was rammed into Hunk's mouth and tied there. "We're waiting right here till the girl gets off. You'll enjoy seeing that, I *don't* reckon."

THE man sneered at Hunk's helpless fury and they began the wait. It was the longest thirty minutes the old waddy had ever spent. His body ached, his mind spun and he was sweating from head to foot. He wanted to smash the tense silence with a flaming sixgun. They stood without talking. He saw the flare of a match and knew that Jake Collins in the rig was smoking. The horse in the rig's shafts snorted and stamped occasionally; but that was the only noise. Hunk began to feel whipped.

Finally, from within the courthouse, came the quick burst of people clapping. The womenfolk's tableaux were over. The hardcase behind Hunk cried, "All set, Jake. She'll be out any second. Now whale the daylights out of that horse. Styles is waiting at Parson Gridley's over at Junction. He's in a sweat to get married—"

"I know, I know, dammit;" came from the rig.

There was a flash of light from the rear of the courthouse. The rear door opened quickly, clicked shut. A voice called out, "Mr. Collins, Mr. Jake Collins!"

Jake Collins deftly swung the rig forward towards the voice. Hunk followed with helpless eyes, choking as he peered through the dark. Then he saw her. It was yellow-haired Nancy. She scrambled down into the rig, beside Jake Collins. With the whip Jake cut savagely at the horse. The rig jumped forward, down the dirt road, cut across the vacant lot, then, racing along, into the Sage Junction road, toward Parson Gridley—and the tinhorn.

"There they go," exclaimed the hardcase, and jerked the bandanna from Hunk's mouth. "Almost wish I was doing some eloping myself."

Hunk spat and the other went on, "Now, you and me'll just take a walk down to the Silver Dollar. I'll set you free in about an hour. You can't do no more meddling, then."

They skirted the courthouse and then they were easing down the main street, yet empty. As they neared the Silver Dollar the gunslick was walking beside Hunk, ramming the .45 into his ribs. Hunk was desperate. What the hell, he reasoned, what have I got to live for anyhow? Nancy gone, home gone, job gone, and me an old useless goat. I'll grab for this jake's gun. What does it matter if he does shoot me? Hunk was raging mad, his reason all vanished suddenly.

He spun away, suddenly. His left hand knifed around, knocking the gun away from his ribs. The gun exploded and everything seemed smoke and fire. He grabbed the other's gun wrist, and with his right hand he clawed blindly at the man's middle, where he knew his own gun was. He found it, jerked it partly free, then rammed the muzzle forward, deep into the gunslick's vitals. He pulled the trigger and the hardcase fell back screaming, grabbing at his belly, still firing. Hunk shot him through the head, spun around, raced towards the far end of the street and Mackesby's livery barn.

Mackesby was inside, waiting for the customers from the courthouse, when Hunk appeared, wild-eyed, shouting, brandishing a smoking sixgun. "Where's that big-chested skewbald gelding that won this morning's race? I got to have him, pronto!" Mackesby jumped up, smelling trouble.

"What the hell's going on, Hunk?"

Hunk told him and Mackesby did not ask another question. Seconds later, Hunk drove his solid steel rowels into the flanks of the snorting skewbald gelding, went booming out of town through the dark on the trail to Sage Junction.

Though there is no official record for the distance, old Hunkley Addams, ex-76 puncher, that night broke what records there were. He slammed into Sage Junction's main street only twenty-five minutes later. He was by now in such a state of excitement that he was acting like an hombre with the D.T.'s. He had decided that Styles France was a dead galoot, married or single. "What if they do hang me? What have I got to live for? Ah, by jingo, there's Jake Collins' rig in front of the house with all the lights on."

IN FRONT of the house he flung himself from the saddle, vaulted the picket fence. Six-shooter in his right hand he crashed in through the unlatched door. They were all there in the living room. Nancy and the gay tinhorn stood side by side before Parson Gridley. Jake Collins was best man and a couple of no-accounts stood nearby as witnesses. Parson Gridley was holding the Book, his lips were about to frame those last words which double harness a man and woman till death. Then Hunk crashed into the room and, to the man, they spun about, jaws sagging.

"Hold it up! Don't say it!" The sweating, alkali-covered apparition waggled his gun at the parson. Then it turned, let out a roar. "I come for you, tinhorn. Start a-smokin'."

The parson was able to tell a gunfight when he saw one, even though it was in the living room of his own home. He dove for cover, followed by the two no-accounts and Nancy Pry herself.

Gunfighting was Jake Collins' trade. He stood fast, snarling, firing from the hip, and Hunk's first slug caught him just between the eyes. The game dealer knew the chips were all down and led off with his Colt, then trumped this with a .41 calibre derringer which he fingered with expert delicacy from his left hand. The Colt shot wide, but the derringer took Hunk high in the left shoulder. Hunk swore, took his time, as he peered for the mark through the smoke- and curse-filled room. Then his big gun crashed, its slug knocking France halfway round as it drilled him directly over his heart. He dropped like a sack of grain, boothill bound.

* * *

The morning sun fell hot on Hunk Addams' new-bandaged shoulder. The derringer slug had gone clear through. The wound, the sawbones said, was a nice clean one; and now Hunk was all set to go to work. As he started down the walk towards Mackesby's livery barn, somebody stepped out of the nearby land office and laid a kind hand on his good shoulder.

" 'Morning, Hunk. I got something to say to you."

The stove-in old sin-twister found himself looking up into the grateful eyes of John Pry, the 76 boss.

"Then spit it out, John. I got places to go."

"Yesterday when we got back from the drive, I was told a little story about how a certain tinhorn sharper got his one-way to boothill—"

There was a sudden shout of laughter. A big-shouldered kid with a fine white-toothed smile came hammering down the middle of the street. Quirting her cayuse like crazy, trying to catch up with him, was a yellow-haired girl with big blue eyes. The big-shouldered kid shouted back at her, "Two bits I beat you to the courthouse, Nance!'

The girl laughed, "That'll be another two bits you owe me, bub!" and as she came racing by the cowmen on the walk she flung Hunk her very friendliest "Good mornin', amigo."

John Pry waved and watched them race toward the courthouse. He spoke happily, "She'll soon have a gent to lay down the law for her." He nodded significantly at the courthouse. "Marriage license."

"You was fixing to say something to me, John," the old waddy spoke impatiently.

"Why, yes, Hunk. We're short of top-hands now out at the 76. As long as you can stand on them stove-in, flea-bitten shanks o' yourn you got a berth there.

"Another thing," the 76 boss went on. "Here, take it." He had fished a freshly inked land deed from his pocket. "Here's a clear title to a certain little hillpocket lay-out over on Skeleton Creek. The new and sole owner is a certain Hunkley Addams." John Pry folded the paper, tucked it into Hunk's faded blue range jacket. Then their hands met in a firm clean grasp. Hunk wheeled and started off towards Mackesby's livery.

"Where you bound for, anyhow, Hunk?"

"Where am I bound for?" Hunk stopped and his eyes sparkled. "Why, out to the 76, to work of course, you blamed idjut! You think I'm going to lay around and wait for them cows to climb out of the brush and beg to be branded? Or, dammit, maybe you really think I'm too old to work, hey?"

Hunk was beginning to clench his fists excitedly as he looked at his boss. Clearly he was on the prod again. He stared impatiently.

"That what you think, hey?"

John Pry grinned slowly, felt his jaw. It was still sore. He decided that he had better let that question go unanswered.

Thrilling Range Novel

Gun-Guards for

He was leveling to finish off Archer when Jim yelled. Whirling, he raised the sixgun.

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

CHAPTER ONE

Riata Renegades

NO RIDER in the cattle country was more hated—or more feared—than the range detective. There was scarcely a man in the Panhandle, big cattle baron, nester rancher or mere cowpuncher, who hadn't at one time or another done some mavericking of one kind or another. That was how a poor man got a start in life, and how a rich man got richer. To outlaw it, to call it rustling, was like taking away a free man's rights. And the rider who went about in friendly guise, to snoop and pry, was despised. The seeds of suspicion were sown wherever he traveled.

Trail's end for such a rider was apt to be a lonely spot offering cover for ambush guns, and the range detective himself was not without fear. Jim Burnett knew all that. He knew that even the men who

the Devil's Drift-Fence

The drift-fence extended east and west farther than the eye could see, for Matthew Wylie planned to enclose every acre of the range he considered his own. Yet, in his heart he knew that no fence on earth could keep out the red destruction and death that was riding, hell-for-leather, straight for a grim and bloody showdown at the XOX ranch house.

hired him held him in contempt. Those big cowmen, organized as the Panhandle Stockmen's Association, had told him to his face, "It takes a thief to catch a thief.... We'll pay you a hundred and twenty-five dollars a month, Burnett. For results."

He had swallowed the insult. If burning his brand on a few mavericks made him a thief, he was still less a thief than those big ranchers. They were stealing the whole Panhandle range, crowding out the cowpen ranchers and the Mexican sheepherders—even killing off the antelope and the wild mustangs. No, the insult didn't matter. Nor did the money, good pay that it was. As for results, Jim had promised to get them. Now, after five months of twisted trails, he had the evidence and was ready to act. It all added up to the Riata Cattle Pool, as Jim had suspected. That was why he had taken the job that tried a man's soul—to smash the Pool.

The campfire splashed ruddy light into the darkness. A stocky figure was silhouetted by the bright glow. To the right were the dark waters of the Canadian, to the left a clump of cedar. A two-wheeled *carreta* stood beyond the fire, and beside it a tethered horse stamped and switched. Mingled with the smell of burning wood was the odor of cooking *frijoles*. The Mexican wood-cutter was about to have his supper. It did not look like a trap. Jim Burnett waited a moment longer, however, just to make sure.

The wood-cutter spooned beans from kettle to tinplate, hunkered down and began to eat. He stuffed himself with all the gusto of a man without anything on his mind or conscience, and Jim, halfway satisfied, called, "Hello, the camp!"

The Mexican reared up, plate in left hand, gun in right. *"Quien es?"* he demanded. "Who is it?" For an innocent man, he was lightning quick.

"My name's Burnett. I've just come from Alejandro Plaza."

"What do you want here?"

"A word with you, Manuel. Your uncle told me where to find you."

The Mexican muttered to himself in Spanish, then said, "Come in, Señor Burnett. I can give you some *frijoles*."

Jim rode in through the brush of the river break, leading his pack mare. The Mexican still held his gun, his dark eyes wary. Jim dismounted, taking care to keep his hand away from his gun, and hunkered down by the fire. He said, "I ate at the Plaza, with your family. You go ahead and finish. I'll have a smoke."

Manuel resumed his place by the fire, and, after laying his cocked sixgun beside him on the ground, went on eating. Jim rolled and lighted a quirly cigarette, and sighed heavily. He was tired, and looked it. His lean sun- and wind-darkened face was seamed with weariness. Its angles looked sharper than they should have looked. But his was more a weariness of the spirit than of bones and muscle. The trail had been bad, but the danger had been worse. Manuel finished his beans and wiped his mouth on his shirt sleeve. Jim passed over his makings.

"Your uncle, Alejandro Gomez, is a friend of mine," Jim said. "Maybe you heard him speak of me. . .?"

"Maybe, señor."

"A month ago, your uncle tells me, you were herding sheep for him," Jim went on. "That was before you started cutting fence posts for the Wylie Ranch, I guess. You had your sheep on the grass in a little valley south of here, and you saw some riders driving cattle west."

"*Si.*"

"You had a little trouble with those riders?"

"There are men who do not like sheep, Señor Burnett," Manuel said. "Nor those who herd them. The *Tejanos* shot at me—a little." He was silent a moment, thinking. Then: "Since you are my uncle's friend, I'll tell you. . . . I saw the *Tejanos* do more than drive cattle. They let their herd graze and they made camp, and at sundown another rider came. He was riding a black horse, and driving thirty head of cattle—by himself. He was friends with the other riders, and he threw his cattle in with theirs. Then he rode back the way he had come—" The Mexican pointed to the east. "The herd went west."

"You saw the brand on the thirty head of cattle?"

"*Si, señor.* It was like this. . . ." Manuel used a wood splinter to draw an XOX in the dust. "The rider's black horse had the same mark."

"What'd he look like, *amigo?*"

"He was a big man—*robusto.*" Manuel drew the splinter across his left cheek. "He had a scar—so."

Jim nodded, looked pleased. He said, "And the riders who drove the cattle west? Your uncle says you figured they were riders for the Riata Cattle Pool. What made you think that?"

"They had a chuck wagon," Manuel said. "For cook, they had a man I know—one named Sebastian. I talked with him, before the *Tejanos* started shooting at me and my sheep. Sebastian said he was paid by the Riata Cattle Pool, and that the herd was on its way to Taos."

Jim said, "*Muchisimas gracias,* Manuel. You've told me just what I needed to know." He flung his quirly butt into the fire, and rose. "I'll be on my way." He started to turn away, then swung back. He took cigarette papers and tobacco sack from his pocket, handing them to the Mexican. Low-voiced, he said. "Roll a

smoke. Look unconcerned. There's somebody watching us from the brush. I'll take care of him."

Manuel's eyes flickered, but he said calmly, *"Si, señor."*

Jim walked to his horses, swung to the saddle of his big gray gelding and caught up the pack mare's halter rope. He called out, *"Adios,"* and turned his horses away from the camp.

The man he had caught a glimpse of was crouched down behind a brush thicket perhaps fifty feet from the fire. Jim's attention had been caught, as he rose from by the fire, by the dull glint of a button, a belt buckle or a gun barrel. Now he avoided looking toward the clump of bushes, riding on until he was perhaps twenty feet past it. Then he grabbed for his sixgun, and gigged his mount about.

"Don't move, you!"

The crouching man grunted in surprise. But he didn't move.

Jim dismounted warily, walked into the bushes, and ordered, "Stand up, but keep your back to me." He saw now that the man held a rifle, so he reached around with his left hand and took it. He tossed the rifle deeper into the thicket, then relieved the man of his sixgun. "Now you can turn around."

The man turned. He was lanky, stoop-shouldered, hollow of chest. His face was a dark and bony mask, the mouth a broad gash and the nose big and hooked. Jim uttered an oath, and said, "Jake Archer. What's the idea, Jake?"

Archer said nothing.

"I thought you were running a bar up in Tascosa," Jim said. "You on my trail or were you Injunin' up on the Mex to see if he had anything to steal?" He paused, scowling at the man. Then: "Look; there are ways to make you talk, Jake. You better do it the easy way."

"All right," Archer muttered. There was a whine to his voice. "But first you've got to savvy that I mean you no harm. I could have gunned you down while you were talking to the Mex. Many a man would've done it—what with a thousand-dollar bounty on your hide."

"A thousand—!" Jim said, almost yelling it. "Who made that offer?"

"Riata."

"When?"

"A couple of weeks ago," Archer told him. "I've a friend inside the Pool. He told me. Riata is offering a thousand dollars for your ears. That bunch claims you've been hearing too much."

A CHILL quivered up and down Jim Burnett's spine. It was one thing to know that a big outfit was out to get him, and another to hear from another man's lips what sort of a death sentence had been pronounced. His quick fear was a normal, human thing; but it angered him. He was willing to die in a fight to smash the Pool, but with bounty-hunting killers on his trail, the odds were against his ever getting a chance to strike out at the outfit. The man at the head of Riata was smart, devilishly smart. Jim still had his gun levelled at the skinny Jake Archer.

"Let's get back to you," he said. "Maybe you figured on collecting that bounty—but didn't have the guts to shoot me, even from cover."

"I swear, Burnett—"

"What were you up to, then?"

"My game's the same as yours," Archer explained, talking fast. "I'm a range detective for the Canadian River Association."

"Never heard of it."

"It was organized just a month ago," Archer said nervously. "A dozen of the smaller ranchers got together to protect themselves against Riata and other rustling outfits."

Jim's face turned rocky. He knew Jake Archer was lying; but he also knew that, having made up his story, the hardcase would stick to it no matter what happened to him. Archer was a spineless sneak, but he could be as stubborn as a mule. "All right," Jim muttered. "I'll take that. Now let's hear what you were doing here in the brush."

Archer's eyes were beady bright in the gloom. He swallowed audibly, and went on, "I've been hunting you. I figured we could team up, since we're both out to smash Riata. I came through Alejandro Plaza tonight, and those Mexes told me you'd come up here. I Injunned up like that only because I figured it might be a trap. How could I know those Mexes could be trusted? For all I knew, they might have been tied up with Riata."

"It sounds good, Jake. Too good."

"It's the truth, Burnett. Why should I lie to you?"

"For a thousand-dollar bounty," Jim growled. "Where's your horse?"

"Back along the trail, in some rocks."

"Go to it, Jake—and ride out."

"You ain't teaming up with me?" Archer whined. "Like I want?"

I'd rather team up with a sidewinder," Jim told him. "Get going."

"What about my guns?"

Jim had the hardcase's six-shooter in his hand; he removed its loads, and gave it to Archer. He went deeper into the bushes and picked up the Winchester. He emptied it of cartridges and tossed it to Archer.

"Get going," he ordered.

Jake Archer went, mumbling to himself. Jim waited, listening, and shortly heard a horse being ridden away through the darkness. Manuel was there. He had been listening to the talk, and Jim turned to him.

"Sleep light, amigo," he advised. "That blackleg may come back—to try and find out what you told me."

"Have no fears about me, Señor Burnett," Manuel replied.

JIM rode away from the river breaks and headed across the plains, traveling southwest. Short of midnight he halted and offsaddled, and put his two horses on picket lines. He spread out his bedroll. Once he was in his blankets, he rolled and lighted a cigarette. And lay thinking. He was almost certain that Jake Archer had meant to kill him. And if Riata had offered a thousand-dollar bounty for him—which was perhaps the one bit of truth Archer had spoken—then there would be other men out to cut off his ears. . . . In a country where men worked for thirty or forty dollars a month, a thousand dollars was a fortune. It was enough money to turn even an honest man into a bounty-hunter.

There was no doubt that the man behind Riata was smart. He not only had the Pool's own riders on the lookout for Jim Burnett, but every other man who could use a thousand dollars. Jim suddenly realized that he was just about the loneliest man in the Panhandle.

His feud with Riata was no small matter—to him. Six months ago, rustlers had jumped a herd Jim and his father, Old Dan, had been driving north to Dodge City. There had been a lot of shooting, and Dan Burnett had been killed. The rustlers didn't get any cattle, but they did get Old Dan's life. The raid took place at night, and the raiders had been masked. Jim would have had no way to learn the identity of the band if he hadn't shot one of the rustlers out of the saddle. The man had died that same night, and he'd talked a little. "I was riding for Riata," he had gasped.

That was why Jim had taken the job of range detective with the Panhandle Stockmen's Association—a job he hated. It was his best chance of smashing the Riata Cattle Pool, for once he unmasked the members of the Pool—the men who were its organizers—the Panhandle outfit would give him men and guns to wipe it out. . . . And in six months, Jim had learned the names of most of the Pool's riders and "associates." Until tonight, however, he had failed to learn the name of the one man who was the Pool's head man. But his talk with the wood-cutter, Manuel, had given him a clue. Jim was sure he could find Riata's boss, now—a man with a scar across his left cheek, a *robusto* man who rode a big black horse branded with the XOX mark. . . . He would find him in the morning.

CHAPTER TWO

Spitfire Hellcat

IT TOOK Jim longer than he had expected to reach the XOX headquarters. The XOX, or Wylie Ranch, had moved from its old buildings at High Wells to new ones on Broken Wheel Creek, forty miles east. As Jim rode up, he saw the big new adobe ranchhouse among some big cottonwoods. The barns and bunkhouses and corrals were a little to the south and down-creek. Jim swung his horses over to the ranch buildings, and came first to a shed that was a blacksmith shop. A shaggy gray beard of a man was putting the finishing touches on a shoeing job on a pinto pony. Jim dismounted, hunkered down against one wall of the shed, and watched the blacksmith work. The heat of the forge, along with the pale late October sun, made the shed comfortably warm. It made Jim feel drowsy. He lighted a cigarette.

A girl in riding clothes came from the direction of the house. At sight of her, Jim no longer felt drowsy. He recalled hearing in Tascosa that Old Matt Wylie had a granddaughter, and that she was a looker. She was. Even in boots and levis, buckskin jacket and mannish hat, the Wylie girl was good-looking. She was tall and moved as gracefully as a *señorita* at a *baile*. She had gray eyes and her hair, Jim guessed, would be called sorrel. Her hair was thick and wavy—she now removed her hat, coming into the shed—and was the bright red-brown of a brand-new penny. She gave Jim a look, then spoke to the blacksmith.

"You got Pete soon finished, Hank?"

"Just a minute, Jan," the graybearded Hank said. "Where you riding?"

"Nowhere in particular."

"Not down to the Lower Broken Wheel?"

The girl's cheeks reddened. "That, Hank, is none of your business."

Hank chuckled. He had the shoeing job finished, and, as he gathered up his tools, gave Jim a look for the first time. "Looking for a job or just a meal, stranger?" he asked.

"Neither," Jim replied. "I want to see Matthew Wylie."

"Friend of his?"

"Nope; don't know the man."

The girl was listening. She broke in, "Matthew Wylie is—"

Old Hank interrupted, "The old scoundrel is up to Tascosa. This here young lady is his granddaughter. She takes care of most of Matt's business. You can talk to her."

Jim looked at the girl, and said, "My name's Burnett—Jim Burnett, Miss Wylie. I ride for the Panhandle Stockmen's Association. I know your grandfather isn't a member of the Association, but I guess he's friendly to the outfit." He paused, seeing Jan exchange a look with the blacksmith. Then he went on, "In fact, I'm a range detective."

"I've heard of you," the girl said. "In fact, Matt Wylie talked about you. He said the Association had hired a man who's done a lot of mavericking, himself. He said some folks call you a cow thief."

Jim grinned at her. "Some folks say the same thing about Matt Wylie."

Old Hank choked violently. The girl laughed.

"That's one trick you've taken," she said. "Matthew Wylie is one of the worst rustlers that ever swung a wide loop and carried a running iron. I've heard him boast that he got his start down in South Texas, after the War, by putting his brand on mavericks by moonlight."

"Wasn't called cow stealing in those days," Old Hank muttered. "You be careful, girl, how you talk about your only kin."

"Well, it's called stealing nowadays," Jim went on. "So most every man that ever forked a horse is a thief. But I'm after the hombres who steal branded stock. The real rustlers. Your grandfather been losing many cows lately, Miss Wylie?"

"Matt Wylie cusses out the Riata Cattle Pool before and after each meal," Jan said, laughing. "Yes, he's losing cattle."

"You got a man on the payroll who's got a scar like this . . . ?" Jim drew his forefinger down his left cheek from temple to mouth corner. "A big man. A Mexican described him to me as *robusto*."

Once again girl and blacksmith exchanged a look. The manner of each changed, grew almost unfriendly. Jan said, "Maybe we have got such a man working for the XOX. Why do you ask?"

"Tell me his name, then I'll answer your question."

Jan hesitated, then said, in a wintry voice, "All right. Your description fits our foreman, Russ Hagarman. Now say your piece, Burnett."

Jim had remained hunkered down by the wall all this time. Now he rose to face the girl squarely. "I've reason to believe," he said, "that Hagarman is the big man of the Riata Cattle Pool."

JAN WYLIE cried, "Oh, no!" Old Hank swore, then demanded, "What proof you got, Burnett? Dammit, you can't just ride in and call one of the XOX hands a blamed rustler. Let's hear your proof!"

"I've got a witness who saw the man I described, throw thirty head of XOX cattle in with a herd Riata 'punchers were driving west," Jim said. "A witness is proof enough. A month ago, I was in New Mexican markets. A Riata hand jumped me, tried to crowd me into a gun fight.

He was too slow wtih a sixgun, and I disarmed him. He talked a little, saying that the big boss of Riata put up at Wylie's XOX."

"Go on," Jan Wylie prompted. "What's the rest of it?"

"At first I figured maybe Matthew Wylie was the man," Jim said. "Then I remembered that he had a reputation for being honest. When I heard my witness' story, I knew it wasn't Old Matthew. A rancher wouldn't rustle his own cattle. So my man must be Russ Hagarman."

"What do you aim to do about it?" Old Hank asked.

"I'll have a talk with Hagarman."

"It'll be a gun-talk, if he's guilty. Maybe even if he's not."

"I'll take that risk," Jim stated. "I've wanted to talk with the head man of Riata for six months—with a gun in my hand."

Old Hank tugged at his beard with a gnarled hand. He was a solid old oak of a man, with a broad brow, steely and intelligent eyes, and a prominent jutting nose. He looked like a wise old patriarch.

"Tell you where Hagarman is right now," he said slowly. "The XOX is build- and a drift-fence all the way across the southern range. Hagarman rode down there to see how the contractor is coming along. Matt Wylie wants that fence built before winter sets in, and he figured Hagarman is the hombre to see that the fence-builders get a move on." Hank paused, turned to the girl. "Jan, you're riding that way. Suppose you ride with this detective-hombre."

"Well . . ." Jan hesitated. "Oh, all right."

Jim saddled the pinto pony for her, then removed the pack from his mare. He turned the mare into one of the XOX corrals. Mounting his big gray, he swung south with Jan Wylie. The plains rolled south like a sea of grass, as far as the eye could see. The tall grass leaned with the wind; there was always wind there on the open plains, but this one had a chill bite to it. The sun was already low, a pale sun without much warmth. Winter was closer than a man wanted to think.

Riding stirrup to stirrup with Jan Wylie, Jim suggested, "A bad thing, a drift-fence in winter. The first storm will drive your cattle against it, and they'll pile up and freeze to death. What's Matt Wylie's idea?"

"He's gambling," the girl replied. She was no longer friendly; the accusation against Russ Hagarman had alienated her. "He's risking his cattle against a fence, but he's saving them from rustlers. Last winter storms drifted the herds a couple of hundred miles south—and Riata got away with at least five hundred head of XOX stock."

"What's your grandfather think of Hagarman?"

"He thinks Russ Hagarman is one of the best."

"And you?"

"I won't believe anything against Russ until I see how he takes your accusation," the girl retorted and touched spurs to her pinto.

They continued due south, over the unchanging prairie, passing scattered herds of cattle. Stock of other brands was mixed in with the XOX cattle, for this was still open range and ranchers permitted the cattle to drift and mingle. Jim noticed, too, unbranded mavericks among the herds. After perhaps ten miles, they reined in atop a rise to blow their horses. Jan said they still had about twenty miles to the drift fence. And she added, "Somebody's trailing us."

Jim twisted in the saddle, and the wind whipped his face like an icy breath. It was growing colder by the minute. His eyes stung, watered. He blinked. The rider on their trail was mounted on a sorrel horse; he reined in now, evidently waiting for Jim and the girl to go on. He was too far off for Jim to recognize his face, but the skinny body and the stooped shoulders could belong only to Jake Archer.

Jim straightened in the saddle, rolled and lighted a smoke. He smoked in silence, his face growing stiffer and darker. Finally he deadened the quirly butt by crushing it against his boot heel. He was not one to risk a grass fire by dropping a lighted butt. He said, "Let's go."

The rise fell away on the south side in a bare gravel slope, and it hid Jim and his companion from Archer. With the slope at his back, Jim drew the Winchester from his saddle boot and said, "You ride on. I'll catch up with you. I'm going to get rid of that hombre yonder."

"Why? Why do you fear him?" Jan asked.

"I don't want a bullet in my back," Jim growled. "Riata is offering a bounty on me—a thousand dollars to the man who brings in my ears. I don't want that ornery son to collect it."

The girl reached back into her saddle-bag, and brought out a six-shooter. The gun was big and heavy in her small hand, but she leveled it expertly. "You'll do no killing on XOX range," she snapped. "Ride on, Burnett! Ride ahead of me!"

Jim chuckled, a bit sourly. "Maybe you'd like to collect that bounty?"

"I don't like those Riata rustlers," Jan shot back. "But I like snoopers who call themselves detectives even less. I'm not joking, Burnett. Do as I say—Ride ahead!"

JIM gazed at her for a long moment, and knew she was in earnest. She meant what she said; she was determined to keep him from going after Archer. But he said, "I guess you wouldn't shoot a man in the back," and dismounted.

He went back up the slope afoot, and behind him, Jan Wylie cried, "Damn! Oh, damn you, Burnett!" Her gun roared and its slug slapped into the ground just above Jim. He went on climbing, knowing that she knew too much about guns to have missed so easy a shot. The girl's resolve had weakened. She had let him call her bluff. Jim reached the crest of the slope, and saw that Archer had come on a short distance. But the hardcase had reined again, perhaps because he had heard Jan's shot. Jim swung his rifle up.

The first shot went over Archer's head, the second kicked up dust right under his pony's nose. The sorrel bucked, rearing up. Jim had an idea that Jake Archer nearly lost his seat. The hardcase was yelling. He started waving his right arm, perhaps to show that he would do no shooting. Jim got down flat and steadied his rifle for a careful third shot. He wanted to put the fear of hell in Jake Archer. The third shot was never fired. Jan Wylie dropped down beside Jim, grabbing his rifle.

"Cut it out!" she said furiously. "That man's doing no shooting!"

"I'm not trying to hit him," Jim told her. "All I want is to scare him off my trail. He sticks like a tick to a steer!"

"You're not—not trying to hit him?"

"I can shoot a lot better than that," Jim stated. He saw that Archer was riding off, not fast but steadily. He could almost hear the bounty-hunter cursing. "Do you protect every no-good who happens along?" he inquired of the girl.

"More than you think," she said, in an odd voice. "Much more."

He looked at her. They were stretched on their stomachs side by side, her thigh touching his. Something began to stir in Jim Burnett; it was a rush of feeling that overwhelmed him. He slipped his left arm around Jan Wylie, and kissed her squarely on the mouth. When he released her, there was fury in her eyes. She hit him. She didn't slap his face with her opened hand. She hit him with her fist, hard to the jaw. Jim's head rang. He blinked, seeing her mistily.

"You try that again, and I'll shoot you," Jan stormed. "I swear it, I'll shoot you!"

She bounded up. Her breast was rising and falling rapidly. Her face was stiff, pale, and her eyes blazed. Her hat hung at her shoulders by its chin cord, and the wind was tousling her red-brown hair.

Jim got up, stooped for the rifle she had dropped. Then: "I won't do it again. No; I won't do it again—at least, not until you ask it."

"Ask!" Jan gasped.

"Let's go back to the horses," Jim growled, and went back down the slope. He felt like a man who had tackled a wildcat, and come out second best. He mounted, and the girl mounted. They rode the remainder of the way, nearly twenty miles, without a word between them. And at Broken Wheel Creek, Jim Burnett found she had gotten the best of him another time.

THE drift-fence extended east and west as far as the eye could see—and much farther. Two building crews were working toward each other, and now only a half dozen unfenced miles lay between them. The XOX south drift-fence ran straight as a die for more than a hundred miles, at a cost of many thousands of dollars, and it was but the beginning. Matthew Wylie planned to enclose every acre of the range he considered his own. The big ranchers were taking over the Panhandle.

It took much work and many men for such a project. As Jim Burnett rode up with the girl, to the west fence-head, he saw hundreds of men busily swarming about. A post went up every forty feet, and for every post a hole had to be dug. Four strands of barbed wire were stretched from post to post. Wagons hauled barbed wire in from Dodge City, from the railroad there; other rigs brought cedar posts in from the river breaks. There was a camp of tents, the biggest tent used by the cooks furnished by the contractor. The workers were from Mobeetie and Tascosa, from the nearby Mexican plazas, and some were nesters.

Jim reined in, and said, "Where's Hagarman?"

Jan Wylie replied, "He doesn't seem to be here." Her lips curled with a mocking smile that filled Jim with quick suspicion.

"You knew he wasn't here," he accused. "You brought me on a wild goose chase. You and that old codger, Hank!"

"Russ Hagarman has a right to know—to be warned."

"And Hank went to warn him, while you brought me here?"

"Matthew Wylie," the girl said, and now mocked him with laughter. "You sure were fooled, Burnett!"

"That blacksmith—?"

"Matthew Wylie can't be idle, even if he is rich," Jan said. "He likes to work with his hands. And I've called him Hank ever since I was a little girl. But I don't think Russ Hagarman will get off as easy as you're thinking. Matthew Wylie will settle with him—if it's true that Russ is head of Riata." Her amusement faded. "You don't need to look so sour, Burnett. Matthew Wylie has fooled lots of strangers who rode up looking for the owner of the XOX. It pleases him to pretend that he is but one of the hands."

Jim felt like swearing. He said instead, "Maybe his little game will have a tragic ending. If he accuses Hagarman of being a rustler, Hagarman is liable to kill him. An old man like that. . . ."

"Whatever Russ may be," Jan told him, "he won't harm Matthew Wylie. He may *rustle* XOX cattle, as you say, but he'd never use a gun against Matthew. Now if you'll excuse me, there is someone here I wish to see."

She swung away, riding toward the camp. Jim looked after her with a feeling of a helpless anger. A man stepped from one of the tents and smilingly greeted the girl. Jim recognized him as Steve Loring, a building contractor from Mobeetie. Loring was young, handsome, something of a dude. Jim now understood why Jan Wylie had ridden to the drift-fence; he could understand too why she had resented so violently his kissing her. She was in love with young Steve Loring. Jim found himself resenting the contractor—but why, he didn't wholly know.

Jan dismounted, and stood talking with Loring. Her face was aglow; if ever a girl wore her heart on her sleeve, it was Jan Wylie. But now Jan's face changed, her smile faded. A buckboard and team came up to the camp, and a blonde girl in a gingham dress was driving the rig. Jim Burnett watched it in pantomine: Jan's resentment of the newcomer, and Loring's smile for her. The girl in the buckboard handing down a cloth-covered basket to Loring. He lifted the cloth, examining the contents—certainly some choice dish the girl had made specially for him—and then thanked her.

Jim knew the girl. Her name was Clara Sheppard, and she was from Missouri. With her father and brother, she lived at a nester place on the Lower Broken Wheel. They were poor, as such folks always seemed to be, but Clara herself was rich with youth and a fresh beauty—and Jim could understand Jan Wylie's resentment. Jan was retreating. After but a few words to Clara Sheppard, she mounted her pinto. She came riding back toward Jim Burnett, after a chill farewell to Steve Loring. Jealousy had hold of her. She reined in sharply.

"What amuses you, Burnett?"

"Looks as though you made a long ride for nothing," Jim said. "You should take a lesson from Clara. She knows that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach."

"So you know Clara Sheppard?"

"I know the whole Sheppard family. On their way from Missouri, they stopped at the Burnett spread. That's up north of the Canadian."

Jan showed interest. "What happened to your spread when you took this job as

range detective?" Jim's reply was stormy.

"I sold out to the big Prairie Cattle Company."

"So you'd be free to smash Riata," Jan said, gazing at him narrowly. "Look, Burnett; would you be interested in catching a couple of rustlers at work—rustlers that maybe deal with Riata?"

"Lead on," Jim said, suddenly not trusting her too much.

THEY rode west while the sun sank below the rim of the plains, then swung south as the purplish dusk thickened. They came to a broad bend in the shallow Broken Wheel, and splashed across to take cover in a clump of cottonwoods. Wind howled through the trees, and it seemed as cold as a mid-winter gale. They reined in and dismounted, and the girl's teeth chattered as she said, "We'll wait."

A fire would have been a welcome thing, but, if there were really rustlers, it would have been a giveaway. Jim shivered and thrust his hands deep into his pockets. The moon came up, bright as a lantern. Cattle drifted down to the creek, at the opposite bank, and Jim realized that this was a watering-place where cattle gathered each night. He turned to the shivering girl, but she whispered, "Shh. . . . Riders coming!"

There were two riders, and they reined in a hundred yards from the drinking cattle. Jim understood their purpose; they would let the cattle fill themselves with water, so that the critters would be too heavy to move fast, then they would close in with wide loops. . . . It was the old "moonlighting" brand of mavericking—or rustling.

Finally the two riders came in. The cattle started running back onto the range, but two ropes snaked out and two critters went crashing down. Jan Wylie's voice was triumphant, "You see . . . ?" Jim saw all right; the two riders were Old Luke Sheppard and his thirteen-year-old son, Jeff. The pair had roped a couple of yearlings. They dismounted and struggled with each yearling in turn, tying the critters' thrashing legs with piggin' strings. They'd build a branding fire next. Jim mounted and rode from the cottonwoods, crossing the creek. Young Jeff let out a warning yell, and his father grabbed a rifle from the saddle boot on his mount's saddle.

Jim yelled, "Hold it, Luke," and give his name, before advancing toward the two men.

Luke Sheppard lowered his rifle, looked a little sheepish. He was a tired looking man of fifty, aged beyond his years.

"You gave me a scare, Burnett," he said. "I figured at first you were a XOX rider. Those hombres don't like mavericking."

"You mavericking, Luke?"

"No brands on these yearlings, friend. See for yourself," Luke Sheppard said, defensively. "Wild stuff. Any man's for the taking."

Jim cocked his right leg about his saddle horn and had himself a smoke. He believed a man as poor as Luke Sheppard was an honest and truthful man, and he said, "Luke, I'm a range detective for the Panhandle Stockman's Association. Have you ever had any dealings with the Riata Cattle Pool?"

"That rustling outfit? Not me, Burnett."

"What brand you going to burn on those mavericks?"

"My own. You want to see my iron?"

"If you don't mind."

Sheppard didn't mind. He got his branding-iron off his saddle and handed it over. Jim struck a match and studied the iron in its glow. It was an LS brand. And Riata's brand was a keyhole mark—or, as some men called it, a skull. Jim returned the iron.

"No bad feelings, Luke?"

"None at all, Burnett."

Jim nodded, said, "S'long," and swung back across the creek, dropping his quirly butt into the water. He pulled up and told Jan Wylie, "Mount up. We're riding back to the XOX."

"You're not arresting those two?" the girl demanded.

"They're branding mavericks," Jim retorted. "Maybe some folks call that cattle stealing, but I don't. And I reckon Matt Wylie doesn't. The Sheppards are putting their own LS brand on those critters, and I've got no proof they're dealing with Riata." He leaned forward in the saddle, looking down at the girl's angry face. "You can't get away with it, Miss Wylie," he said flatly.

"Get away with what?"

"Don't play innocent," Jim growled. "I see through your little game. You figure that if Clara Sheppard's menfolks are arrested on a cattle stealing charge, that'll

queer her with Steve Loring. You don't want Clara to have that fence builder—you want him yourself. But you've chosen a mighty poor way to win him. Such a sneak trick doesn't become the granddaughter of a big rancher. Me, I sure think a lot less of you, now."

"Burnett, if I were a man—"

"You're not, and can't be, and if you were I'd give you the whipping you deserve. Climb on your pinto. We're heading back to the XOX, so I can brace that hombre you led me away from—that sidewinder who wants my ears, Russ Hagarman. Mount or I'll get down and turn you over my knee—and give you the hiding old Matt Wylie should've given you long ago. A pants warming would do you some good!"

CHAPTER THREE

White Menace

JAN mounted, then, hurriedly. They rode from the cottonwood grove, headed north through the moonlight. They spoke only once during long ride. Jim asked, "How'd you know the Sheppards would be mavericking tonight?"

Jan took her time about answering, but finally said, "Your friend Clara gave it away." Her voice was bitter. "She told Steve Loring, when she drove up to the camp, that she decided to visit him because her father and brother were going to do some branding at Cottonwood Fork. Visit him! Why she's running after the man like a shameless—"

"You talking about Clara now, or yourself?" Jim asked, as she paused.

Jan Wylie muttered, "Damn you, Burnett!" Evidently she had acquired her vocabulary from the XOX cowboys. Jim chuckled. One minute he could be sore at her, the next he liked her. He suspected that once Jan Wylie was halter-broken, she'd do a man proud.

* * *

It was close to ten o'clock when they reached the XOX headquarters. Jan dismounted before the big adobe house, and threw Jim her pinto's reins. "You put up the horses, then come to the house," she told him. "I'll have supper fixed for us, by then."

She turned away and Jim headed for the corrals. He off-saddled, turned both horses into one of the pole corrals, then carried the saddle gear into the nearby harness shed. When he stepped from the shed, a match flared. A man was standing against the corral fence. He was holding the match flame to a quirly cigarette in his lips, and its glow splashed over his broad face. It was Russ Hagarman's face.

Jim had never seen Hagarman before, but the description he had been given by Manuel, and vouched for by Matt Wylie and Jan, fitted this man. He was burly, well over six feet, ruddy-faced. An ugly scar ran all across his left cheek. His eyes had a yellow glint. His cigarette alight, Hagarman dropped the match. Now darkness obscured his face.

"Been waiting for you, Burnett," he stated. "Matt Wylie told me you'd been here and would come back. You've been talking loud, saying I'm head of the Riata Cattle Pool. You're pretty smart. Too smart for your own good. What else did you find out about Riata?"

"I found out all I need to know, Hagarman," Jim said. He would see that the man had a gun in his right hand. "Riata's got an office headquarters over in New Mexico, at Taos. Nobody there but a bookkeeper, who's a lunger and an Easterner and doesn't know much about the cattle business. I know Chris Hooker and Sebe Mattox are Riata's ramrods, and I know the names of most of the outfit's riders. Nobody connected with Riata in the open has brains enough to run the outfit. That's why I kept on looking for the big man—meaning you, Hagarman. You worked out a slick scheme. You got one or more cowpunchers working for each big ranch to buy in with you. Ed Jarman, up at Big Prairie, paid in four hundred dollars. Mike Delaney, who rode for my old man, gave you his savings of two hundred dollars. I could name a dozen other men who are stockholders in Riata."

"Go on, Burnett," Hagarman sneered. "You're doing fine."

"Those hombres don't ride for Riata, but they get a share of the profits," Jim went on. "And to build up their profits, they ease the way for Riata's rustling. Mike Delaney crossed up my father by hazing a few head of his cattle into a lonely canyon, so Riata riders could pick them up. That

sort of thing has been going on all over the Panhandle. There's only one thing I can't figure out. Why have you been working here as a foreman, when Riata is sure to have made you rich?"

"Two reasons," Hagarman said mockingly. "One reason is that it was good cover for me. Nobody but Riata's ramrods and bookkeeper knew I was the outfit's head. No outsiders suspected me—until you started snooping. The other reason was better still. I want a big spread here in the Panhandle, and I've taken a fancy to the XOX. Old Matt Wylie's not going to live forever, and his son's dead—and there's only the girl. Now you know all about me and Riata, Burnett. But knowing won't do you any good. I've got a gun in my hand, and it's already cocked. You sure can't draw in time to beat me."

A voice came from the deep shadows alongside the barn. It was Jake Archer's voice, saying, "Take the chance, Burnett. I'm siding you!"

Hagarman muttered an oath, and his gun roared. Jim was drawing his own sixgun as he was hit. Hagarman's bullet slammed him back against the wall of the harness shed, but he hung there and got his weapon up. He fired at Hagarman, but the burly Riata boss was moving fast along the corral fence. Jake Archer's gun was blazing, and it became a duel between those two. Hagarman fired as he ran, and Archer kept shooting from by the barn. Jim was bent double with pain, and his brain was reeling, but he managed to fire a second time.

He missed again, and Hagarman now got the corral in back of him. He was lost to Jim's sight, and over by the barn Jake Archer's gun went silent. Men were running from the bunkhouse. Jan Wylie called out from the house. Jim heard no more. He let himself sink down. There was no strength in him.

JIM was in good hands, there at the XOX. Matthew Wylie sent one of his crew riding hard to Tascosa for Doc Bailey. The medico arrived in mid-morning, but he wasted no time after coming into the bedroom into which Jim had been carried. He examined the wound in Jim's left side, then got out a bottle of anesthetic. He used his surgical instruments with a skill borne of long experience with gunshot wounds. Without a doubt, Jim owed Doc Bailey his life.

But as the days passed, he realized he owed others a debt as well. Jake Archer, for one. If the skinny hardcase hadn't been prowling about, Hagarman wouldn't have been driven off with his killing job a failure. Jim owed much to the cowpuncher who had ridden to town for the medico. And there was Jan Wylie, too, who took turns with Maria, the Mexican housekeeper, in nursing him. Lying abed, weak and helpless, Jim had plenty of time to think about Jan Wylie. She'd been spoiled by her grandfather, but there was good in her. She proved that by caring for a man whom she had reason to dislike a great deal.

Doc Bailey had told Jim to remain in bed for ten days. In four days, he was out of bed and sitting up in an armchair. Jan and Maria disapproved. Old Matthew Wylie chuckled, and said, "Men are tougher than women and doctors like to believe." The rancher stopped in to talk morning and evening.

"Hagarman fooled me," Wylie growled, when they talked about the fight. "I raised Cain with him, then fired him. He packed his warbag and bedroll, and rode out. I figured he was gone for good. He must've been watching for you and Jan to show up."

"What about Archer?" Jim asked.

"Queer hombre, that Jake Archer," Matt Wylie said. "He showed up here at supper time, and ate a handout meal. Said he was just riding by. He pulled out, maybe an hour after dark. Like Hagarman, he must've Injunned back. He's a hombre I don't trust."

"He saved my hide," Jim said. "And I'd figured he was out to get me. Looks like he's no bounty-hunter, after all."

"What's his game, then?"

"He claims he's a range detective for an outfit called the Canadian River Cattle Association—some little ranchers that organized to fight the Riata Cattle Pool. Me, I never heard of such an outfit."

"I never did, either," said Matt Wylie. "I'd bet a hundred head of prime stock that Archer is a liar. Even though I don't savvy why he's lying."

The fifth day, Jim felt much like his old self again. He had breakfast down in the

kitchen, and joked a little with the buxom Maria who even at forty liked to flirt with a young man. Later he asked Jan for pen and ink and paper, and he sat in Matt Wylie's little office next to the parlor and wrote a long letter to the Panhandle Stockmen's Association.

He wrote down all he had learned in six months as a range detective, and suggested that the Association get the Rangers on the job. He pointed out that Russ Hagarman was the boss of the Riata Cattle Pool. As he sealed the letter in an addressed envelope, he knew that in a way it was an admission of failure. He had gotten the results demanded by his employers, but he had failed to bring down Russ Hagarman—which had been his personal stake in the game. Still weak, he was in no shape to take to the trail and hunt down Hagarman. Jim now was turning that chore over to the Association. It was a bitter pill. Jim Burnett was a man who felt that revenge was best obtained by the gun of the man who had been wronged.

JAN WYLIE was in the parlor, sitting by the fireplace. There was a roaring log fire in the hearth, for outside it was bitter cold. It was only the first week in November, but winter had come early to the Panhandle. Jim asked Jan if she would send his letter out with the XOX mail, and she nodded and took it. The girl looked as though she wanted to cry and was holding back tears only by pride and will.

"What ails you?" Jim asked.

"Nothing that concerns you, Burnett."

"Anything that concerns you, concerns me," he told her gently. "You know that, Jan. You must know how I feel about you." He stood looking down at her, studying her. "It's Steve Loring, I reckon."

"He—he's going to marry Clara Sheppard."

"How do you know?"

"I heard it from one of our riders, who stopped at Steve's camp," Jan said. "The fence is completed, and Steve isn't going to do any more fence building until spring. He's taking his equipment back to Mobeetie. And he and Clara are going to be married next month."

"And you're blaming me for it?" Jim said. "You figure that if I'd arrested Luke Sheppard and his boy, it'd ended things between Steve and Clara. You're wrong. Steve wouldn't let that stop him from having Clara. Forget him, Jan. You never had a chance with Steve Loring."

Jan jumped up and started pacing to and fro. "What's wrong with me, that he'd want Clara instead of me?" she cried. "Matt Wylie's granddaughter is a better catch than a nester girl." She halted before Jim. "Is she prettier than I?"

"Not in my eyes," Jim told her. "To me, there's nobody prettier than you."

"Then why—why?"

Jim felt like shaking her. She was spoiled; she'd never been denied anything she desired until now, and she couldn't understand why she couldn't have Steve Loring. But even though he was angry with her, his arms ached for her. He suddenly wished that Jan Wylie was a nester girl instead of a cattle baron's granddaughter. So that she wasn't so far beyond his reach.

Matthew Wylie came in, slamming the door behind him. "Snow," he growled. "Flurries already, and I'd gamble that there's a blizzard coming. Jim, one of my riders just got back from Tascosa with a wagon-load of supplies. He saw Jake Archer up there, and Archer asked about you."

"What's he up to now?"

"Lew—that's my rider—says Archer sent a warning to you," Wylie went on. "Archer said Hagarman is gathering his Riata riders at an abandoned Mexican plaza someplace along the Canadian. He says it looks like a showdown, and that you can count on him."

"Is that all he said?"

"Lew couldn't get any more out of Archer."

"I'll go to Tascosa and talk with Archer," Jim said.

"Wait till morning," Matt Wylie urged. "By then we'll know if this is a blizzard coming or just some snow flurries. In your shape, you can't afford to be caught out in a storm."

"All right," Jim agreed. "I'll wait until morning."

BUT he didn't start out the next morning. The blizzard struck that night, raged over the plains all the next day. The snow was wind-swept, piling up in giant drifts

around the XOX ranch house and buildings. For a few hours during the second night, the snow let up. But the wind howled out of the north. And carried the drifts away.

A horse pulling an empty buckboard stumbled up to the ranch that night. The XOX cowboys had to break the ice away from its nostrils. A couple of the hands volunteered to saddle up and make a search for whoever had been riding in that buckboard. They came back a couple of hours later, half frozen. They had found no one. They reported that the storm was driving the herds south.

Matthew Wylie said, "No matter. The drift fence will stop them."

Jim Burnett couldn't help saying, "You're too old a cowman to think that, Matt. If this storm keeps up, the cattle will pile up against your blamed drift fence and die by the thousands."

Wylie didn't say anything to that, but he looked worried. The next morning it was snowing again, and Jeb Abbott, a contract mail carrier, came in. He was nearly twenty miles off his route, and for a time couldn't understand that he was at the XOX. His mule team had brought him to shelter, otherwise he would have lost his life. He was blue from the cold. Matt Wylie had him brought into the house. Jan gave him a big dose of whiskey.

"Don't know how I got east of the Broken Wheel," Abbott muttered. "My route doesn't come this far east. Passed McDade's stage station yesterday afternoon. . . . Should have stayed there, but the 'dobe station was filled up. So was the lean-to barn. Lot of riders on the move."

"Riders?" Jim said. "What riders?"

"Hardcases," Abbott replied. "Must've been a dozen of them. An unfriendly bunch. Weren't talking much, just playing cards. Heard them say though that they were coming in from New Mexico when the storm caught them. . . . McDade was anxious to be rid of them. He told me, just as I pulled out, that they were Riata Cattle Pool riders."

Jim looked at Matt Wylie. "What's it mean?"

"I don't know," the rancher muttered. "But it looks as though Jake Archer is a

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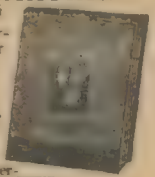

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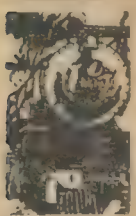
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man who knows what he's talking about."

* * *

The blizzard raged all that day, so savagely that it was dangerous for a man to attempt to make his way from the bunkhouse to the ranchhouse. Away from a building, even as little as twenty feet away, he was more helpless than a blind man. Jim Burnett was growing impatient. He felt sound again, and with his returned strength came the desire to take Russ Hagarman's trail. Only the storm kept him out of saddle, now.

His impatience was made greater by the knowledge that the Riata outfit was so near the XOX and planning some move. Jake Archer had sent word that it was to be a showdown, and that suggested that Hagarman was gathering his hardcased crew to come after Jim Burnett. Jim kept asking himself, *Would Hagarman dare bring his tough hands to the XOX?* It didn't seem likely. Hagarman would realize that Matt Wylie and his big crew would fight against Riata. . . . Still, Russ Hagarman was making some big move. Jim's impatience made him restless, and he prowled about the ranchhouse. Jan Wylie watched him, puzzled.

She finally asked, "What's wrong? Don't you like it here?"

"It's not that, Jan. But Hagarman's up to something."

"Not in this blizzard," Jan replied. "He's holed up where it's warm." Her manner toward Jim was undergoing a change; she was less hostile but still not friendly. She seemed to go out of her way to talk to him; several times she had inquired if there was any special dish he would like for a meal, saying, "Maria will prepare it for you, of course. . . ." Now she seemed a bit interested. "So long as the storm lasts, Hagarman can't pull anything. Don't worry."

"Suppose he's planning a move against the XOX, as well as against me?"

"Why should he?"

"He told me he wants your spread."

"That's foolish talk. Russ Hagarman knows the day is past when a tough crew can move in and steal a whole ranch."

"It's a chance he might be willing to run," Jim said. He paused, listening. Then: "You hear something? Sounded like shots being fired."

"It was shots!" Jan cried. "You don't suppose—?"

Jim didn't answer her. He had grabbed up his coat and hat, his gloves and gunbelt, and was striding toward the door. He plunged out into the gale, into the murky whiteness. He could see dimly the lighted windows of the bunkhouse, and headed toward them. The icy snow bit his face like a million needles, and the wind made him gasp. It was midday, but everything was as obscure as in the middle of a moonless night. He reached the corrals and saw some of the cowboys coming from the bunkhouse. Then he saw a rider—a hunched figure on a deadbeat horse. The rider had fired the shots Jim had heard, to bring someone to him. Jim reached the rider. It was Jake Archer in a buffalo coat. The man had his hat tied on with a woolen muffler that was knotted under his chin and covered most of his bony face.

Jim yelled, "Come on, Jake," and pulled him from the saddle. A couple of 'punchers helped him carry Archer to the bunkhouse, while another led his horse to the barn. They put Archer on a bunk, loosened his coat, pulled off his hat and gloves. The skinny hardcase was colorless, and stiff in every joint. He looked as much like a corpse as a living man could, and only his beady black eyes seemed alive. They poured whiskey down his throat.

"Riata—" Archer finally gasped. "They get here yet?"

"That outfit's coming here, Jake?"

"Yeah. After you, Burnett. Hagarman's still after your ears," Jake Archer mumbled. "But that's only a small thing. He's coming to take over the whole XOX!"

CHAPTER FOUR

XOX Showdown

GETTING the story out of Jake Archer was like pulling teeth. The man couldn't stop shivering. The cold had gotten into the marrow of his bones; he'd suffered so much, ridden so far, his mind wasn't quite rational. His thoughts wandered, and he talked, mumbled, trivial things. How he'd lived through the blizzard, only he and perhaps the devil knew. He talked of changing horses twice along

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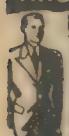

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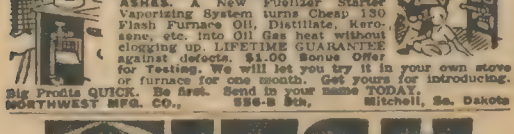

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the way, of emptying a bottle of whiskey. Jim kept questioning him: "What about Riata, Jake? And Hagarman?" Archer was getting drowsy, would soon be asleep. Old Matthew Wylie came, joined the circle of cowhands.

"I got a friend in Riata, Burnett," Archer muttered. "He lets me know what goes on. You should have trusted me, amigo."

"Sure, Jake—sure."

"Hagarman's a devil," Archer went on. "And he's got it all worked out. He'll send somebody to tell Matt Wylie that rustlers have cut the drift fence and running off a couple thousand head of cattle. . . . He figures Wylie will send his crew out to jump the rustlers. Then he'll bring in his toughs, and take over the XOX headquarters. He's counting on catching Matt Wylie and his granddaughter. From there on, the game's his."

Archer drifted away, his eyes closing. Jim shook him awake.

"How so, Jake? How could the game be his?"

"He'll give Matt Wylie a chance to deal with him," Archer said dully. "He'll offer to buy the XOX. With the girl as a hostage, Matt will be glad to take the deal. Hagarman's sure of that. He's got papers all fixed—lawyer papers—for Matt to sign. Once Matt signs, something will happen to him. It'll be a murder, sure."

"When's Hagarman plan to move in, Jake?"

"Soon as the blizzard lets up, Burnett. The storm's his ace in the hole. The devil brewed it up for Hagarman. My friend in Riata rode in to Tascosa to tell me, and blamed near died getting there. I headed out right away—yesterday, I guess it was. I don't remember. . . ."

He was going limp again, and Jim let him sleep this time. Turning to Matthew Wylie, Jim said, "We know enough."

"Maybe," the old rancher growled. "But what I can't savvy is Archer's stake in this. The man's after something—but what?"

Jim didn't know. He began to think he had Jake Archer all wrong from the start, yet he couldn't wholly trust the man. Asleep or awake, Jake Archer wasn't a man to inspire confidence.

"We'll wait for the storm to break,"

Jim said. "Hagarman's messenger will come then—if Archer is right. You can send your crew out, Matt, like they're riding to chase the rustlers. Hagarman'll have somebody watching, to make sure the crew rides out. What he won't know—until too late—is that the XOX crew will ride right back here!"

THE snow changed to rain, then the wind veered and grew warm. The rain let up and that night the stars came out. Morning was like a spring day. Winter had made a false start. Matt Wylie sent his crew out onto the range in a normal fashion—but not too far out. The cowhands found only scattered cattle, for the storm had drifted the big herds south. They found cow critters frozen to death, others mired in gumbo mud, and a few drowned—for the heavy thaw of the snow, combined with the rain, had flooded low areas. There was mud and slush everywhere, and in some places the ground steamed like hot springs.

Late in the afternoon, one of the cowpunchers came loping in. He swung up to the ranchhouse where Jim Burnett stood with old Matt Wylie.

"A Mex rider just came up-trail," the 'puncher said excitedly. "Claims he met a hombre who sent him here with word that rustlers cut the drift fence and are running off every live critter they can find!"

"You see anybody else out on the range?" Jim asked.

"Yeah; there's a hombre with a buckboard about two miles to the west," the cowboy said. "He's got a broken axle and he's trying to fix it with baling wire. Looks more like he's there to keep an eye on us."

Jim looked at Matt Wylie and said, "This is it. Call in the crew, Matt, and we'll go through with it as we planned. Unless. . . ." he looked the old rancher straight in the eyes—"unless you want to pull out and take Jan to Tascosa, where you'll be safe."

"Safe, hell!" roared old Matt. "I'll stay and fight!"

The XOX during the next hour was astir with activity like any big outfit preparing to buck a rustling raid. Cowpunchers came in for fresh mounts and to arm themselves more heavily. Jim made sure that the dozen-odd riders knew what was

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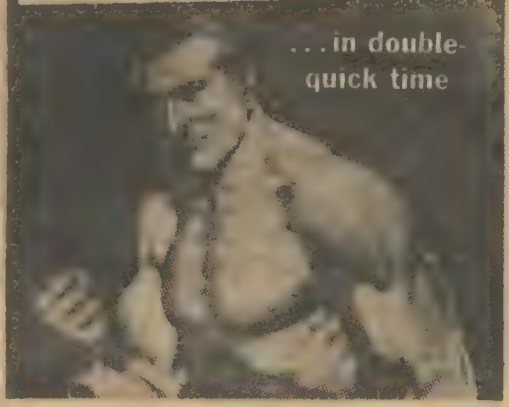

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expected of them, then said, "All right, boys, head out. And make it look good."

They rode out yelling, one or two firing off their six-shooters, and soon they were lost to sight. Jim knew that the man with the broken-down buckboard would fall for the ruse. . . . He was sure the fellow was spying on the XOX for Russ Hagarman, and, though it would have been a simple matter to take care of him, Jim didn't molest him. He wanted Hagarman to think things were working as the Riata boss desired.

It was still two hours from sundown, but Jim was taking no chances. He sent Matt Wylie and Jan to the bunkhouse, considering it a better place than the ranchhouse to fort up in, but Maria, the housekeeper, wouldn't leave her kitchen.

The waiting was hard. It made a man's nerves knot up, made his belly feel empty even though he was not hungry. Jim prowled about, his rifle under his arm, watching the far distances in every direction. The sun was nearly down, and he saw no sign of riders. Jake Archer too was prowling. The man wasn't wholly recovered from his bout with the blizzard, but his beady eyes burned with a feverish eagerness.

"Once it's dark, they'll come—sure," Archer muttered. "It'll be Russ Hagarman and the whole Riata crew!"

"Jake, you're blamed anxious for this. Why? What's it to you?"

"I'm out to smash Riata," Archer said. "And smash it good!"

The sun was gone. A purple-tinted haze lay over the plains. Archer said, "Riders coming." And Jim added, "Two of them. XOX riders."

The two came in, off-saddled, turned their mounts into the corral. Jim sent them to the barn with their rifles and six-shooters. Ten minutes later, another rider came in. And after him, by another ten minutes, there were two more. It was part of the plan. By ones and twos, the XOX crew returned to fort up. Jim spread them out, some in the bunkhouse, some in the barn, two in the harness shed. He wanted every man behind cover, but placed so that the Riata crew would be caught in a great crossfire. Only Jake Archer wouldn't take cover. He kept prowling about, until Jim figured he

was more than a little crazy, but finally it was Archer who yelled, "Here they come!"

JIM ran to the bunkhouse, ducked inside, slammed and barricaded the solitary door. The walls were adobe, a foot thick, and there were four small windows, one to a side. Matt Wylie and Jan and four of the crew were there. Jan was loading rifles.

Jim ordered, "Put out the lights, Matt."

With the lamps extinguished, the bunkhouse was pitch dark. Jim took the front window, lifting the sash out and laying his rifle across the broad sill. There was a moon, and in its cold glow he could see the big bunch of riders approaching the ranchhouse that was perhaps two hundred yards away. The Riata crew was moving warily, evidently suspicious now that every building was dark. Someone came up behind Jim. It was Jan Wylie. She touched his arm. Her voice was a low whisper.

"I just want you to know, Burnett," she told him, "that -well, no matter how this ends, I hold no grudge against you, for any reason."

"Does that mean you've gotten over Steve Loring?"

"Do you want it to mean that, Jim?"

"Yes, Jan. You and I—"

He got no farther, for outside Jake Archer was yelling like a wild man. "Here we are, Hagarman! Come get us, you son!"

The Riata outfit came closer to the XOX buildings, slow-walking their mounts. Except for the sounds of the horses—hoofs splashing through mud and water, the creak of saddle leather, and the rattle of bit chains—the night was hushed. The raiders halted

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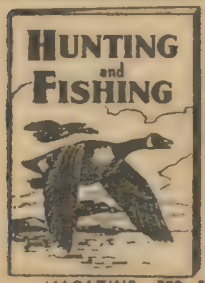

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midway between the adobe house and the ranch buildings. The XOX hands were obeying Jim's orders, holding their fire until he fired the first shot.

A voice complained, "I don't like this Hagarman. It's too damn' quiet. It's a trap, sure."

Jake Archer, now hidden somewhere, mocked loudly, "Sure, it's a trap. Make your play, Hagarman. Everything's here for you to grab—the XOX, Matt Wylie and the girl. Maybe you want the girl, eh, Hagarman? You used to be a great one for the women, before that knife scar made you look like the devil!" Archer laughed crazily. "Burnett's here, too, Hagarman. He's the hombre who showed you up as Riata's head man. And I reckon you remember me, Hagarman. Me, Jake Archer!"

Hagarman cursed Jake Archer, who laughed again and called out, "You haven't much time, friend. The XOX crew will be back, soon as they find there's no rustlers at the drift fence. Come and get us!"

Jim Burnett was gripping his rifle so hard his hands hurt. He felt a clammy sweat on his forehead. If Hagarman's suspicions were greater than his rage over Archer's taunts, this would end in a fiasco. The Riata crew would pull out. The rustler band wouldn't be smashed. But now Hagarman bellowed an oath, and roared, "He's over by the barn! Let's get him!"

The Riata crew kicked spurs to their mounts, and swung toward the ranch buildings, their guns blazing at the spot where they thought Jake Archer was hidden. Jim swung his rifle up and fired—fired as fast as he could lever cartridges into the chamber and pull the trigger. The XOX guns roared. It was bedlam.

Not even a tough crew like Riata could bear up under that fire. Men were knocked from their saddles, some screaming as they fell. Wounded horses shrieked, collapsing in thrashing heaps. Panic gripped the rustlers, but they kept shooting. Bullets plowed through the bunkhouse door, ricocheting about the room from one adobe wall to another.

Jim heard Jake Archer begin to yell again. Archer was yelling for Hagarman to stand and fight, taunting the rustler chief. Jim held his own fire, for now, he could find no target. The survivors of the Riata

crew were high-tailing it, scattering. The XOX fire was dying away. A man screamed just outside the bunkhouse. Another man cursed.

Jan Wylie cried, "Jim—no!" But Jim was already going out the window. He hit the ground and started running. At the side of the bunkhouse, a man—Jake Archer—was on his knees and trying to lift his gun for a shot at the man who had wounded him. The man had his back to Jim, but there was no mistaking that big burly figure. Russ Hagarman had lost his horse. Afoot, he had hunted out Jake Archer. He was leveling his sixgun to finish off Jake Archer.

Jim yelled, "Here, Hagarman—Here!"

Hagarman swung around, as Archer sprawled on his face without getting his gun to bear. Hagarman's heavy, scarred face was a mask of fury. He fired as he whirled, and Jim, hearing the shriek of the bullet, returned his fire. He fired and fired again. The gun dropped from Hagarman's fist, but the big man did not try to run or beg for his life. His crazy hopes were dead, and it seemed that he himself wanted to go the same way. He lunged at Jim Burnett, arms reaching, then his legs buckled. And he went down, in a limp heap on the ground, not moving again.

IT WAS over, then. What was left of the Riata crew had scattered, and surely would not stop until the Panhandle lay far behind them. The XOX crew, with only three men wounded, came from the ranch buildings—silent now, not yet ready to talk over the fight. Four wounded were found

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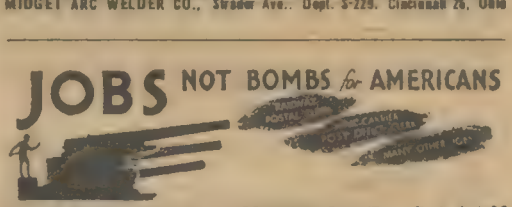
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among the fallen Riata riders, and they were taken into the bunkhouse to be bandaged up and held for the law. The wounded Jake Archer was taken to the Wylie ranchhouse.

They put him to bed and Jim examined his wound. Jim told Matt Wylie to have Maria heat water and fix a carbolic solution. Archer lay very still, his face ashen. But his beady eyes were aglow.

"We smashed Riata, eh, Burnett?" he asked weakly.

"We did that, Jake."

"But I'm dying . . .?"

"Maybe you better ease your mind," Jim told him.

"Maybe so. . . ." Archer suddenly moved, twisted by a spasm of pain. Then: "Hagarman did me dirt, years ago. It was up in Kansas. It was over a woman and some money. Hagarman cheated me out of both. I tried to kill him once before—that's how he got that knife scar. You see, Burnett, the woman died because he mistreated her. I came to Texas to get him, and when I learned he was one of the Riata Cattle Pool, I figured I could get him—with help from men like you. You should've trusted me, Burnett."

"You're right, Jake," Jim said, and grinned. "But you're not going to die. You've got all that pain because Hagarman's shot smashed your ribs. I'll clean your wound, bandage you up tight, and in a couple of weeks you'll be all right."

"You telling the truth, Burnett?"

"From now on, I'm trusting you, Jake. So you trust me."

Matt Wylie came back from telling Maria what was needed, and he said, "The XOX will need a new ramrod, Jim. The job's yours, if you want it." The oldster chuckled. "Or maybe I'll have to offer you a partnership. Jan tells me you're likely to be my grandson-in-law. I'll stay with Jake until Maria comes with the medicine and bandages. You go tell the girl whether or not you'll stay here at the XOX."

Jim grinned and nodded. As he left the room, he knew that Jan didn't need to be told that he would stay. But he wanted to see her, anyway. Jim wanted to find out if she would hit him this time when he kissed her.

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